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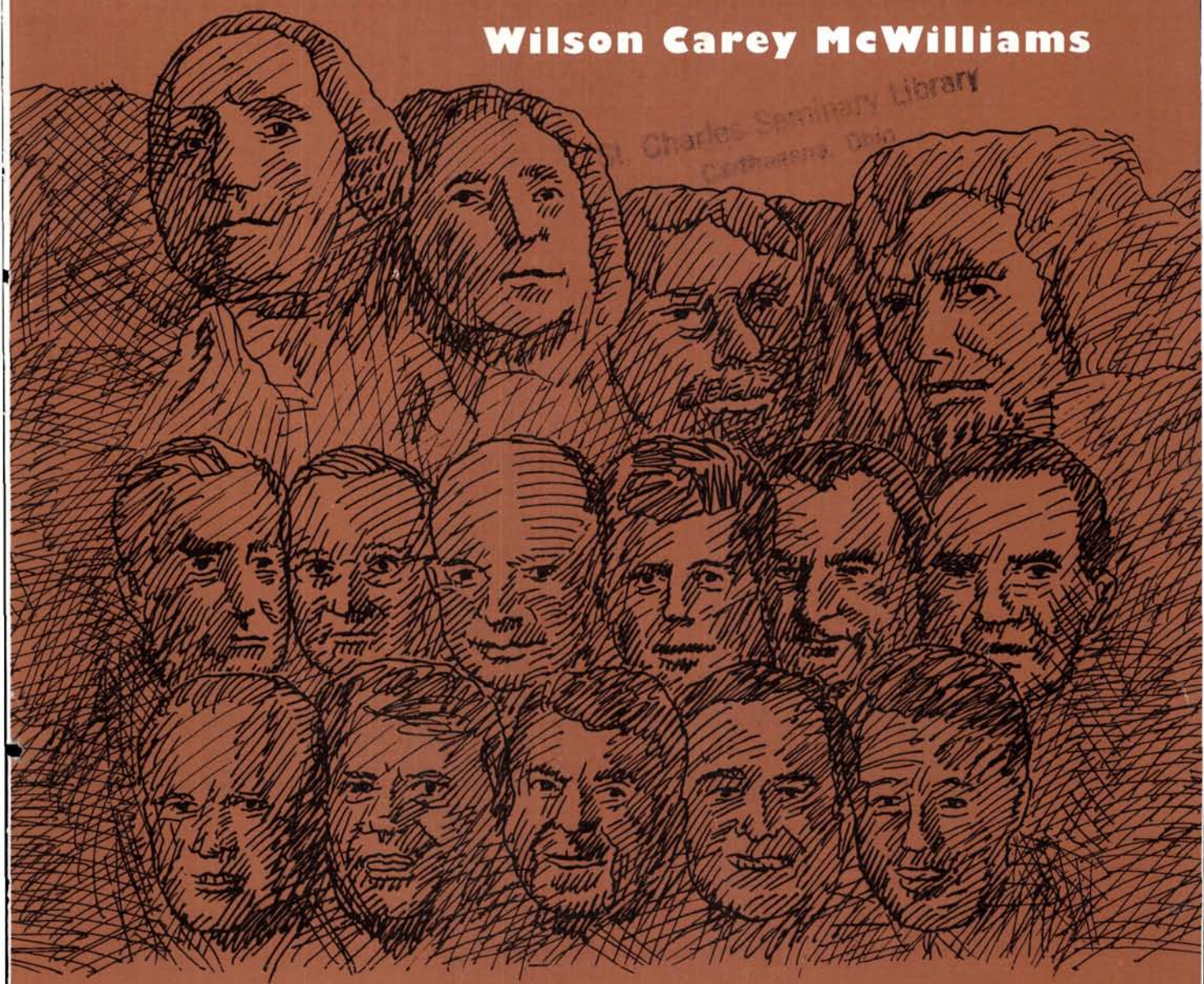
COMMONWEAL

THE PRESIDENCY AT RISK

Wilson Carey McWilliams



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COMMONWEAL

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To the Editors

How to reform health care

Kip Sullivan's article on health-care reform [April 24] remains timely. Congress has been debating an HMO "patient bill of rights" that would not even begin to give patients the most elementary right of all, the right to health care. As long as the number of uninsured continues rising by 100,000 every month and people's lives continue to be treated as commodities, we will all still need health-care reform. The 8,000 physician-members of Physicians for a National Health Program prescribe a not-for-profit, single-payer national health insurance.

IDA HOLLANDER, M.D.
Chicago, Ill.

No to means testing

I find the letter from James and Catherine Pfiester on Social Security, together with the editors' reply, helpful in almost, but not quite, clarifying the meaning of "means testing" with respect to Social Security [Correspondence, June 19]. The usual meaning of "means testing" is that a certain benefit is available only to those below a certain income. Any effort to introduce "means testing" that would lead to the denial of benefits to Americans over a certain income would be fatal to the future of Social Security, for it would turn it into "welfare," something Americans don't like at all, and Social Security would soon go the way of other forms of welfare. If you are using "means testing" loosely to mean more of the kind of mechanisms that the Pfiesters are talking about—such as making all of Social Security taxable for upper-income Americans, or, even better, raising the tax rates for the top brackets—I would strongly support you, but that is not the literal meaning of "means testing." ROBERT N. BELLAH
Berkeley, Calif.

Corrections ■ The phrase "and plenty of saccharine" was included in Mary Pat Kelly's review of *The Sound of Music* [June 19] through editorial error. It does not represent Ms. Kelly's assessment of the play.

The following are corrections of factual errors that also occurred. Peggy Wood played the Mother Abbess in the 1965 film; in the script, Baroness Schrader was the children's rival for their father's affection. The Benedictine convent was Nonnberg ("Nun's Mountain"), not Nurnberg.

Our thanks to Professor Laura Gellott for these corrections of fact; our regrets to Ms. Kelly for changing her meaning.

Our thanks as well to Hieronymus Filteau, who found yet another error in yet another of our attempts to be funny in Latin. In the spirit of Vatican II, we will stick to the vernacular in the future.

Clouded dialogue

The "new science" seems to offer wonderful ground for dialogue such as the exchange in your issue of June 5 among Chet Raymo, John Wright, and Phillip Johnson. Yet that dialogue remains clouded by the deeply ingrained gnostic dualism of American culture, now institutionalized, on the one hand, by the creationists and, on the other, by the anticreationist 1981 resolution of the National Academy of Scientists referred to by Professor Johnson.

The most appropriate comment on these three articles may be one already made in your pages [May 8] by Sidney Callahan: "To me it looks virtually certain that God created a freely operating natural world of independent secondary causes open to rigorous scientific inquiry and discovery. But at the same time this world and the people in it live, move, and have their being in God. The universe as we know it must be completely natural and completely God-saturated."

Amen. My Native American relatives might say another Amen. I'd feel comfortable, too, with squeezing in a word for my beloved animals along with the "world and the people in it."

JACK HOLTERMAN
West Glacier, Mont.

No Designer needed

In your issue of June 5, Professor Phillip E. Johnson made two erroneous statements in his reference to my article in the *Boston Review* on scientific alternatives to Darwinism. I wish to correct these errors.

One error was Johnson's claim that my "program is identical to that of Michael Behe, author of *Darwin's Black Box*." While Dr. Behe and I agree on the inadequacy of Darwinian accounts of evolution, we disagree profoundly on the possibility of formulating satisfactory scientific explanations of the evolutionary process. Behe, like Johnson, appears to believe that evidence of design in living organisms requires an intelligent (and, *ipso facto*, supernatural) designer. As I explained in my review of Behe's book (*National Review*, September 16, 1996), I believe that intelligence is a natural phenomenon manifest at many levels in biological systems.

Johnson's other error was the following rather astonishing sentence: "But the systems he describes are analogous to sophisticated computers, and there is no known natural process that can produce anything of that kind." Excluding natural processes in production of "anything...analogous to sophisticated computers" leaves only the supernatural.

Does Professor Johnson really believe that? We have a fully documented history of computer evolution (as well as a complete "fossil record"), and nowhere does divine or occult intervention play a role. Of course, human intelligence and creativity were essential ingredients, but to many neuroscientists and psychologists, these are complex natural phenomena accessible to scientific exploration. I agree with them and make two further arguments relevant to evolution.

First, computer-like information-processing systems have been shown to op-

(Continued on page 29)

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Good exercise

It was a decision that "strikes at the very heart of the constitutionally mandated separation of church and state" warned the lead editorial in the *New York Times* (June 12). The editorial went on to conjure up a hoary vision of "taxpayer dollars [flowing] into sectarian institutions in contravention of the First Amendment prohibition against the establishment of religion." It railed against the tax-funding of "religious indoctrination," predicted a financial windfall for "religious lobbies," and even foresaw the decimation of the public school system. In short, to fend off the scandalous prospect of mixing religion, education, and government funding, the *Times* summoned the specter of apocalypse.

The cause of this hyperbole was last month's Wisconsin Supreme Court decision upholding the use of vouchers funded by public monies for children attending church-affiliated schools. (*See* www.wisbar.org/Wis2/97-0270.htm for the text of the ruling.) If upheld by the United States Supreme Court, the Wisconsin decision may well bring about a sea change in public education and in how many think about the alleged "wall of separation" between church and state.

In reality, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, as the voucher plan is called, is no threat either to government neutrality toward religion or to the health of the public schools. It merely extends to religious schools a program already in place for nonsectarian private schools. Optimally, the Wisconsin decision will mean wider choice and better schooling for about 14,000 of Milwaukee's poorest children (only poor kids are eligible) and, for the nation as a whole, a less narrowly separationist understanding of the First Amendment's establishment clause. Both prospects are welcome.

Milwaukee's voucher plan was carefully designed by parents, lawyers, and legislators to satisfy the U.S. Supreme Court's recent, somewhat more flexible rulings concerning government aid to religious institutions. These First Amendment rulings suggest that government benefits permitted to secular private enterprises should not be denied to similar religious enterprises. Maintaining state neutrality toward religion does not mean discriminating in favor of nonreligion.

Specifically, Wisconsin's voucher program had to meet the Supreme Court's three-part *Lemon* test: it had to serve a secular purpose; its primary effect could not advance or inhibit religion; and it could not result in excessive entanglement between government and religion. In applying those criteria, the Wisconsin court found the law constitutional. First, it judged that the state's interest in educating all of its citizens was the primary and secular purpose of the state's voucher plan. Second, the voucher program is strictly neutral in dispensing money to either sectarian or nonsectarian institutions. Consequently, the law did not advance or inhibit religion. Important here is that voucher money goes to parents rather than directly to schools. As U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy has articulated the principle of government neutrality elsewhere: "not one cent flows from the state to a sectarian private school...except

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as a result of the necessary and intervening choices of individual parents." In other words, taxpayers, not government, are doing the choosing among religions or between religious and nonreligious schools. Finally, because the law does not entail any special state supervision of religious schools, no excessive entanglement results. Also crucial in securing the Wisconsin court's approval was the voucher law's provision allowing parents to determine whether or not their children will participate in any religious activity.

As the *Times* editorial exemplifies, the rightly cherished constitutional principle of government neutrality toward religious groups is too often understood to require a kind of absolute quarantine between religious bodies and the state. That is not what the First Amendment's establishment clause rightly understood means. As John Courtney Murray wrote, "The whole intent of the First Amendment was to protect, not to injure, the interests of religion in American society." If Americans are to exercise freely their right to religious expression, breaches in the so-called "wall of separation" between church and state are inevitable. Tax-exemption for churches and military chaplaincies, and government aid to religious preschools, colleges, and universities are all examples of how religious expression is accommodated under the First Amendment without resulting in the "establishment" of any one religion. More important, the "American proposition," as Murray phrased it, does not isolate but rather links religious expression and the practice of self-government. Federal Appeals Judge John Noonan reminds us of this political reality in *The Lustre of Our Country* (reviewed on page 20). Any absolute separation of church and state, Noonan writes, "obscure[s] the overlap that exists." Historically, for Americans, "no watertight mental compartments exist by which their religious ideas are isolated from their civic responsibilities."

Commonweal is published once a month in July and August. The next issue, dated August 14, will include treatment of the Vatican's June 29 statement on loyalty oaths.

It is in that light that the injustice of the long-standing prohibition against public funding for religious-affiliated elementary and secondary schools should be understood. Accommodating parental choice in schools would demonstrate a proper regard for the consciences of parents who desire a religious education for their children as well as a realistic assessment of the strengths religious pluralism has long brought to American society. The associational life represented by schools and churches is a laboratory of self-government, not a threat to democracy or national unity. Similarly, voucher programs are not a threat to the far better-funded public schools, which still properly enjoy the allegiance of the majority of Americans. Rather, as in Wisconsin, they enfranchise the poor and constitute a spur to excellence for a public system that has notoriously failed the nation's neediest.

However, as the Framers of the Constitution knew and many religious educators acknowledge, the acceptance of public monies can threaten the integrity of religious institutions. For example, Catholic schools now require all students, regardless of their religious affiliation, to take religion classes and, in some cases, to attend Mass. Clearly, such stipulations will no longer be permitted under the Wisconsin law. It seems unlikely that many parents will remove their children from such classes or activities, but that fact cannot hide the transfer of authority from school officials to the state or the relegation of religious duty involved. Other, similar conflicts will undoubtedly emerge as Catholic schools accept tuition vouchers. Intelligent compromise, as many Catholic colleges have shown, can preserve the unique character of Catholic schools. But the risks involved should not be lightly dismissed. Vigilance will be needed, and, in some cases, conscience may demand the rejection of tax money.

Finally, it is crucial to keep in mind that the Milwaukee voucher program is designed first and foremost to help poor children. Wisconsin's highest court has recognized that vouchers accommodate religious expression in a way that also serves the interests of the community as a whole. That is how the American experience of religious freedom has always worked at its best.

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JOHN GARVEY

THE YALE FIVE

Life apart: A religious freedom?

There are five Orthodox Jews, all first-year students at Yale, who are challenging a rule that says they must live in Yale's mixed-sex dormitories. I wish them well. Their case is complicated by the fact that Yale is a private university which has the right to make its own rules, but the case has larger implications, and the argument the students are making is one that should matter to people who think religion is more than a matter of private taste.

Let me begin by saying that the legal case here is made somewhat more difficult by the fact that we aren't talking about a tax-supported place, and no one has an automatic right to be a Yale student. The university could sum up its argument by saying that if you want to be here, you accept the rules, and if you don't, you can go somewhere else. Legally, Yale would seem to be on solid ground here.

The students, men and women, have charged that Yale is guilty of religious discrimination. According to a good account of the dispute in the May 24 *New York Times Magazine* ("Yeshivish at Yale," by Samuel G. Freedman), the "Yale Five" argue that Yale should be considered a public institution where such a basic constitutional right as freedom of religion is concerned, and is therefore subject to federal antidiscrimination laws.

On the surface, you might wonder why the Yale Five object to living on a single-sex floor in a dorm. But according to Freedman, "no residential college at Yale prohibits visits by either gender, so some students would inevitably have boyfriends or girlfriends spend the night, and use the hallway bathrooms." In addition, the Orthodox students have been encouraged to attend lectures on safe sex, and a required composition class included a reading on abortion.

The problem obviously has to do with more than dormitory life alone, and the students face a wider problem: How do you try to live a traditional religious life in an environment that contradicts it in so many ways? Yale insists that the dorm rule is consistent with the demands made by its curriculum: You may not agree with everything, but you have to be willing to be exposed to it. If not, go to Yeshiva, if you are a Jew (or Notre Dame, if you are Catholic, or Brigham Young, if you are Mormon).

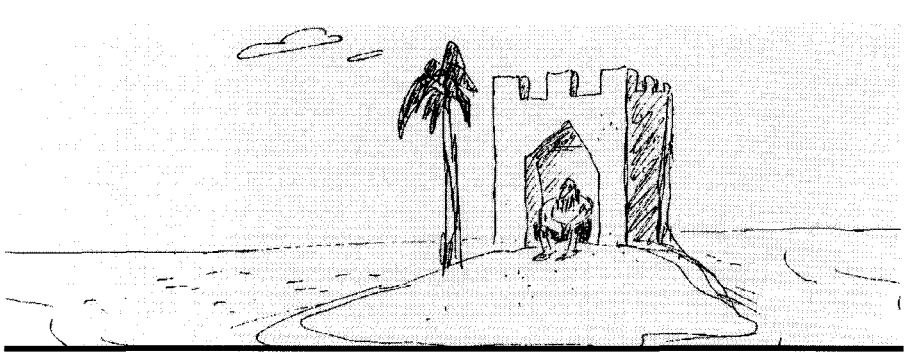
What is really being said here is that secularism has won. You are entitled to your beliefs, as long as you make them a matter of personal and not public concern. If you are someone who believes in a traditional religion, one that makes demands that may separate you in practice from many of your contemporaries, your only right is to keep this fact to yourself, or to make it an interesting part of your individual "lifestyle." But what really matters, from the point of view which rules, is that you—like the Amish and the Hasids—have the right to live at the margins of a world in which nothing matters but commerce and the choice of whatever the hell you want to do, consistent with commerce. The idea that there might be more compelling truths is itself seen as a form of oppression.

How do we reconcile a tradition which does not approve of premarital sex, abortion, and an attitude toward sex which allows anything short of nonconsenting violence, with secular society? According to the prevailing winds, by telling anyone who has another view to sit over there and shut up.

An argument can be made that we will necessarily move to a society in which people like the Yale Five will have to segregate themselves and raise their children separately. I know a lot of homeschoolers who have anticipated this, and I understand and largely agree with their point of view. This case is especially interesting because we live in a time when schools (private schools included) are being told by the government that they may not discriminate in terms of race or sex. At the same time, religious people are told by those who would make the barrier between religion and society absolute that their understanding, their moral concerns—concerns which could be seen as comparable to concerns over racial and sexual discrimination—simply don't matter.

I am glad that the recent moves to enshrine prayer in public schools have failed. They are not a needed form of legislation. Any form of public prayer that could be agreed upon by public-school officials would have all the resonance of most writing done by educators, and would therefore be blasphemous. The Lord of Hosts would, after a committee meeting, be reduced to The Person Upstairs, and we should all be struck dead.

This is different. The Yale Five are saying that all values are not equal, that we should not be made to conform to a pattern set by a society which is indifferent to the idea that some things are demanded of us, that we should at the very least consider these things, as part of any serious education. They are arguing against a surrender. Bless them. □



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John Pawlikowski

PIUS XII & THE JEWS

Further research, please

For a number of years, I have argued that we must move away from simplistic condemnations or defenses of Pope Pius XII and his response to the Holocaust. Such statements do not reflect the complexity of his record, a record that still remains incomplete from the documentary point of view. I also have emphasized that using terms such as "silent" regarding Pius's record is open to serious misinterpretation. If confined to the area of public pronouncements, the use of the term may be appropriate. But if interpreted to mean that he did nothing to help rescue Jews (as I believe the term is primarily understood on the popular level), then it does not stand up to the weight of evidence.

One major research challenge before us is to integrate two lines of scholarship relative to Pius that have never been brought together. As papal nuncio and as papal secretary of state (Eugenio Pacelli), and as pope, Pius XII supported the notion of a distinctive Catholic social order, sharing in Catholicism's century-long opposition to a liberal social model. While he certainly opposed nazism in principle (as his important contribution to Pius XI's 1937 encyclical, *Mit brennender sorge*, denouncing the movement, bears witness), his priority for most of his time in church leadership was the defense of the Catholic church against bolshevism and liberalism. But in the early 1940s, there is a noticeable movement away from his support of traditional Catholic notions of the social order toward an embryonic embrace of a social model bearing some of the characteristics associated with the long-opposed liberal tradition. In his Christmas messages of 1940, '41, and '42, delivered by radio to the peoples of war-torn Europe, we see the beginnings of a fundamental shift in Pius's thinking. These statements show the pope calling for an entirely new social order in Europe and in the world-at-large, an order that would enhance justice and peace for all.

An interesting, and still relatively unexplored, question is how this shift in Pius's perspective on the social order affected his approach to Jewish victimization. There is in the early forties an increase in his efforts, most of them behind the scenes, to save Jews. Is there a connection? Perhaps, but solid documentary evidence for any definitive conclusion is still lacking. Some interesting materials are now appearing which seem to confirm the possibility of such a connection.

Recently I came into possession of a letter written by Rabbi Herbert A. Friedman about a meeting he had with Pius right after the end of World War II. Rabbi Friedman, along with a fellow Jewish military chaplain, Philip S. Berstein, visited the pope at Castel Gandolfo at the behest of the U.S. military to discuss the impact of the Kielce pogrom in Poland. Upon their arrival, Pius led them to a garden where he was providing sanctuary for some two hundred Jewish children. Friedman reports in his letter that in the course of their conversation, the pope brought up the issue of the Vatican's 1933 concordat with Hitler. Pius said that it was a product of its time, but that "he now saw things differently."

But before we posit too quickly that the turnabout in Pius's general perspective on the social order had direct implications for his approach to the Jewish question, we will need to deal more extensively with the work of Marquette University historian, Michael Phayer. He claims that Pius contributed to the exoneration of German Christians right after the war, despite the pleas of such prominent Catholics as philosopher Jacques Maritain. Maritain, then serving as French ambassador to the Vatican, tried to convince the pope that he must address the issue of German collective responsibility, especially that of German Catholics, even those who were not directly involved in the activities of the Gestapo and the SS. Pius remained unmoved by Maritain's argument. In fact, the pope took steps that undercut the German Catholic bishops' 1945 Fulda statement in which they argued that those who took part in the atrocities had to be brought to justice. Maritain's opposition to Pius, which led to his resignation as ambassador, needs to be examined far more closely, including Maritain's personal reflections on Pius, which he left in the French embassy's archives. These are not entirely complimentary regarding Pius's judgment in these matters.

The exchange between the two points to the need to probe far more deeply than has been the case so far into the personal impressions of his contemporaries and how people at the time reacted to his statements. The task has begun, yielding both positive and negative assessments, but I am convinced that much relevant material remains unexamined.

The memoirs of the late Cardinal Henri de Lubac, a leader in the French Catholic resistance, and the testimonies of Italian Jews and Catholics collected in Margherita Marchione's book, *Yours Is a Precious Witness* (Paulist, 1997), indicate a much more favorable assessment of Pius XII. They suggest that his generic statements against the Nazis were understood by some Catholics as directly referring to the attack on the Jews, which Catholics were obliged to counteract with rescue efforts. There are also the testimonies of the late Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, the current chief rabbi in Rome, Elio Toaff, and favorable editorials in the *New York Times* in 1941 and 1942. What we lack is any coherent integration of these materials, favorable and unfavorable. They have been used generally in isolation either to defend or to castigate the pope. Perhaps they can never be brought together into any reasonable holistic picture. Perhaps Pius will always remain an enigmatic figure, though I, for one, am not quite prepared to give up on a more comprehensive picture.

We must also deal more thoroughly with the question of Pius's possible tacit support of efforts by Catholic groups and individuals, such as the Assisi Underground, papal nuncios, and women religious, to rescue Jews. Documentary ev-

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idence is currently in short supply supporting a direct connection between Pius and these rescue efforts. And some historians such as Susan Zuccotti argue that many of these rescue efforts were independent of the Vatican. Still, I am not satisfied that we know all we might regarding this subject. For one thing, it is difficult to imagine (even under wartime conditions) that papal nuncios such as Angelo Roncalli in Istanbul and Angelo Rotta in Budapest acted without some indication of Pius's approval. He could have stopped their work if he had wished. But he did not. While that may not be a moral jewel in his crown, it does indicate some positive attitude towards saving Jews. We may certainly question whether Pius's apparent policy of relying on subordinates to challenge the Nazis publicly on the Jewish question was sufficient. But some credit must be accorded him for these positive efforts. Many, if not most, required his tacit support.

There are defenders of Pius XII's record who note that there was little if any criticism of him from Jewish organizations during the war itself. They argue that the Jewish critique of the pope began in earnest only after the production of Rolf Hochhuth's 1963 play, *The Deputy*. As we now know from the wartime memoirs of Gerhart Riegner, this view is too simple. Riegner, a leading official of the World Jewish Congress in Geneva, relates that for several reasons (including Vatican isolation in a fascist state), Jewish leaders were reluctant to pressure Pius publicly. But they were far from pleased at his general posture toward the Jewish situation. Also noteworthy was the vocal criticism of Pius by Poles and by certain members of the Polish government-in-exile in London. The Polish criticism became so intense that the Vatican commissioned the Jesuits to prepare a defense of the pope.

Another remaining research task is to continue to see if there is any evidence in Pius's personal writings of overt anti-Semitism. Here is where further access to the Vatican archives is critical. The materials released to date seem free of it. But it is simply too early in the investigation to halt the search. The late Robert Graham, S.J., in releasing the available materials, said they were selective.

Finally, there is the so-called "hidden encyclical" on racism and anti-Semitism authored by John LaFarge, S.J., and others, which was presented as a provisional text to Pius XI shortly before his death and never released by Pius XII. We must get beyond the hype associated with the publication of the recent volume by George Passelecq and Bernard Suchecky (*The Hidden Encyclical of Pius XI*, Harcout Brace and Company, 1997). Certainly it remains an important area for further research, but the book in fact does not tell us all that much that is new. Nor, as historian Michael Marrus has argued, does it really prove any "conspiracy" on the part of Pius and his inner circle. The encyclical was probably not issued because of the pope's general policy of not publicly confronting the Nazis.

In closing, let me emphasize that I am not trying to mute a more critical assessment of what we have learned thus far about Pius XII's record. Questions such as whether he should have been more public in criticizing the Nazis, whether he should have acted earlier, whether he should have spoken out simply to maintain the church's moral integrity whatever the practical consequences—all these questions are valid and should be pursued in a nonpolemical fashion, as my own mentor in this area, the late historian Edward Gargan, always argued. They remain important not only for a full understanding of Pius XII's papacy, but for what they might tell us about the Catholic church's posture in the midst of contemporary situations of possible genocide. While we cannot change what Pius did, we can examine and, if need be, alter the church's course today. Ultimately this may prove to be the most important outcome of our research on Pius's papacy during humanity's dark night. □

John Pawlikowski, O.S.M., *is professor of social ethics at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. He has been a presidential appointee to the United States Holocaust Memorial Council since 1980, and is the author of numerous books on Christian-Jewish relations.*

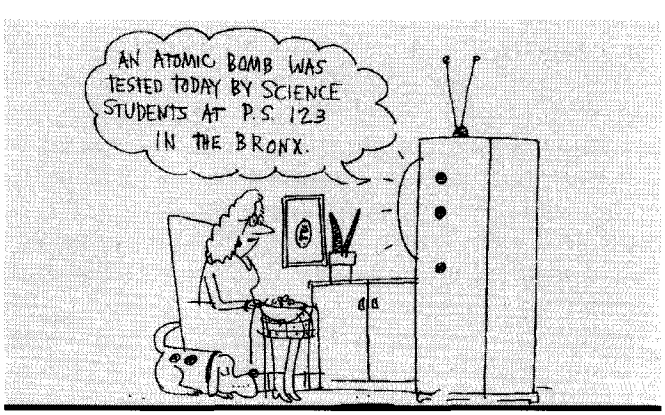
Jo McGowan

FALLOUT IN INDIA

A report from Dehra Doon

When India conducted its nuclear tests in May, my parents and my sister both called immediately from the United States. They were in a state of panic about the danger we might be in. Accustomed to the political grandstanding of India's ruling party (the Hindu nationalist BJP), I was more exasperated than alarmed.

When Pakistan conducted its test some days later, however, I was suddenly terrified. Grandstanding or not, I realized things could spiral out of control in a matter of minutes and our home in Dehra Doon—situated right between Delhi and Pakistan—could be obliterated. Given the present level of tension between the two countries, it is not so unlikely a scenario.



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To anyone with historical perspective on the relationship between India and Pakistan, their nuclear testing was predictable. The bloody riots that accompanied partition fifty years ago set the tone for the distrust and hostility that persist today, even among the otherwise enlightened sectors of both societies.

Since the 1971 war between India and Pakistan (in which East Pakistan became Bangladesh), there has been a clear desire on the part of some Pakistani army officials to "dismember" India. Pakistan has given covert aid to rebel forces in the border state of Punjab, who hope to form an independent state of "Khalistan." Kashmir, the so-called "jewel of India," has for many years been the scene of hostilities as both countries have fought for what they claim is theirs.

To complicate matters still more, Pakistan has a strong military and political ally in China while India's relationship with the Chinese has been hostile, especially since their 1962 war. By Indian reckoning, Chinese nuclear capability translates into Pakistani nuclear capability. India's sense of insecurity in the region is real. Furthermore, the collapse of the Soviet Union brought an end to its substantial support for India. Thus, the thinking of India's military strategists has increasingly shifted: India is too enormous to be dependent on outside help and ought to go nuclear. Until recently, the political establishment, more aware of the negative fallout internationally, resisted.

There was, of course, 1974, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi—in a bid to divert attention from her domestic problems—approved India's first nuclear test. At the time, Pakistan was still recovering from the 1971 war and posed no conceivable threat to India's security. Mrs. Gandhi's decision was aimed at consolidating her electoral votes. No Pakistani government could last, however, without following suit, and immediately Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto told the country's top scientists to develop Pakistan's own bomb.

The next two decades saw enormous technological developments by both countries. At the same time, China was outpacing them on every front. When China conducted tests in 1995, India's nuclear establishment pushed for a "fitting" response; three prime ministers (Narasimha Rao in 1995, Deve Gowda in '96, and I.K. Gujral in '97) turned them down. But when the BJP party took control earlier this year—forming a weak, unstable government that could topple at a moment's notice—it sought to consolidate its power by nuclear testing. And when it did, the immediate reaction at home was all that the BJP could have wished: euphoria and dancing in the streets. Even opposition leaders had to keep their negative views quiet, for fear of sounding antinational.

But with the Pakistani explosions, the opposition rediscovered its voice. They branded the BJP immature, said it was responsible for igniting a new arms race in the region, and argued that India should be "committed to economic and social development" rather than to nuclear weapons.

The common people, at least in the cities, are tense and worried, as nuclear war now seems, for the first time, a distinct possibility. One afternoon my husband and I were discussing the situation in our front room. The windows were open and our neighbor was outside washing his car. Privacy being an unknown concept in India, he turned off the hose to hear our conversation. When I came out a few minutes later, he was eager to add his two cents.

"There will be a war now," he said emphatically. "They are all fanatics in Pakistan. They believe in war!"

"Are we any different here?" I asked, a bit nervously, for my neighbor is an ardent BJP supporter.

"But Pakistan has the backing of the Arab world," he continued. "And don't forget China. We had no choice but to test our bombs."

My neighbor's view is a common one, especially in BJP strongholds like the city in which we live. In the rural areas, however, where my husband travels extensively, it is difficult to get people interested in a sustained discussion of the issue. Drinking water and firewood concern most villagers far more than vague threats of a nuclear holocaust.

As for the economic sanctions imposed on India following the tests, economists here believe that while the loss of foreign investments (totaling approximately 10 percent of the Indian GNP) may create serious dislocations in the pace of development, they will not last. India is now one of the five largest markets in the world and no major economic power can afford to stay out. According to the *Economic Times* (May 13), U.S. companies intend to invest $11.49 billion in India this year, and most European nations, while condemning the tests, have refused to impose sanctions. If the United States and Japan continue in their strong stand, so the thinking goes here, there are many European countries who will be happy to step in. Nonetheless, by June 23, the Indian rupee had fallen to a record low against the dollar.

The peace movement here is small and not widely covered by the press; it is seen as a fringe group. The older generation of Gandhians have mostly faded away (although some are prominent supporters of the bomb!), while the new generation is largely focused on development issues. They emphasize the absurdity of an arms race in the region where the basic needs of so many millions remain unmet.

The most recent sermons exhorting India to comply with a test-ban treaty, which is clearly biased in favor of the nuclear "haves," are not taken seriously here. Even total pacifists, while acknowledging the insanity of pursuing the arms race, bristle at the temerity of the United States—the only nation to have used nuclear weapons—telling India what to do. Why, people ask, does the United States refuse to destroy its own stockpile of weapons or even to make an international commitment not to use them? President Bill Clinton's scolding notwithstanding, India seems bent on pursuing its own course, and one can only pray that the instinct for self-preservation, if nothing else, will kick in before it's too late. □

Jo McGowan *and her family live in Dehra Doon, India. She is the founder of Karuna Vihar, a school for children with special needs.*

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THE PRESIDENCY AT RISK

We need a grown-up

Wilson Carey McWilliams

Politically, the president is in pretty good shape. Vulnerable, Bill Clinton surely is: the voters aren't much inclined to believe what he says, and they respect him even less. Renewed charges that Chinese campaign contributions influenced national security policy also could hurt badly. Just as bad, the Middle East negotiations are stalled, India and Pakistan are building nuclear arsenals, and, around the world, one economy or another always seems to be teetering on the edge of disaster. But Clinton's good luck still hasn't deserted him. Monica Lewinsky is back in the headlines, but Paula Jones is more or less off the board, tales of the president's amorous escapades are having little effect on voters, and Special Prosecutor Kenneth Starr has not become any more lovable, even with the help of professional image-brighteners. The economy is still turning out good numbers. For the moment, there is even hope for Ireland. And with the Clintons' approval ratings high and the president himself a limping lame duck, Republican strategists—concerned to keep their House majority—have been focusing more of their attacks on the Democrats as a party, turning to Clinton stories only to get a laugh. It's the *presidency* that's in trouble, and in that story, the public plays as big a role as its leaders.

At least intuitively, the majority of Americans understand the case for executive power as Alexander Hamilton set it down in *The Federalist*. Constitutional government exists by convention, through agreements and institutions that create a domesticated public space in which the law can rule. But outside and underneath the hedge of the laws is a fundamental lawlessness that always threatens forms and proprieties, especially through the sort of change that renders old laws at least temporarily inadequate or obsolete. Even John Locke, that paladin of liberal constitutionalism, argued that government requires some element of "prerogative," the capacity to act without, or sometimes against, legal rules. After all, when citizens act as rulers, they can't be merely law-abiding; they have to evaluate laws and policies, standing outside and above legality. For most of us, however, this exercise of sovereignty happens only in moments, chiefly in imagination or in the voting booth. On a day-to-day basis, the buck, as Harry Truman famously observed, stops with the president.

Wilson Carey McWilliams, *a longtime* Commonweal *contributor, teaches political science at Rutgers University.*

Presidents, Americans recognize, need the skill and constitutional power to deal with knaves and villains; we can't afford a president who is too honorable or tied to convention. The most conspicuously decent occupants of the presidency in recent years—Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter—are commonly regarded as failures. In recent elections, American voters have showed a decided preference for supple rascality over hampered rectitude; Clinton's very reputation for impropriety may have helped establish him as the candidate better able to build a "bridge to the future."

Nobody needs to tell us that this is a dangerous world, full of threatening presences, in which life is being reordered with scant regard for old ways and certitudes. Increasingly, technology and markets are transforming families, shattering communities, and undermining our older ideas of citizenship and self-government. Civic life seems less able to govern the forces of the time, and also less necessary. And as political community appears to afford us less support for

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Not Icarus

A sky too bleak for Brueghel,
the woods a legion of black sticks
and no bird stirring. What quickens me
is the way the stripped wisteria vine
has writhed its way through the deck railings.
Not woven, though, nor even a meander,
but a series of tortured gestures.
I am learning to settle for small pleasures.
I have filled the sparrow feeder
and tossed out kernels of dry corn
for the resident crows. I have
loaded the thistle tube for finches
and hung a bell of barley
so I can sit like some apprentice Adam
listing the transient birds when
they come. A piece of green
wood in the hearth is snarling,
and when I step out to gather
logs I split two seasons back,
I feel foolish for loving winter so much,
like an adoring husband whose wife
is indifferent to his passion.
In that doleful moment, though,
I find a fallen wren under the suet cage,
his feet twisted up and one stiff wing
reaching skyward and beautiful,
still beautiful, with its rim of ice.

R.T. Smith

our pride and dignity, we offer it less of ourselves. Americans feel more and more "unencumbered" (the term is political philosopher Michael Sandel's), allowed to follow an ethic of personal liberation which, in turn, encourages tolerance for the president's "private life."

In the same spirit, public life is becoming *privatized*, not only through deregulation and government downsizing, but through a politics in which money and lawsuits, administrative hearings and "rights talk" replace the effort to persuade and organize majorities. We are more apt to think of political leaders, including the president, as lawyers or advocates, people we hire for essentially private purposes. Bill Clinton, in these terms, is doing a good job: we put him in as CEO to fix the economy, and his character is irrelevant unless it shows up in the bottom line. If you were O.J. Simpson, would you care about the state of Johnny Cochrane's soul? And it follows, as in the popular recent thriller, *Air Force One*, that presidents also put private motives first, which is O.K., the movie teaches, so long as the Soviet general gets killed in the end.

Other problems aside, however, political leaders may—especially in times of great transformation—have to ask us to do things that cost or hurt, that trouble the existing order, or that challenge the way we see ourselves and our country. In this respect, the privatized view of the presidency, and Clinton's conduct in office, seem more and more like an anecdote without a punch line, or more charitably, an episode of "Seinfeld." As *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich wrote, the swirl of scandal has served to distract attention from the "hollowness of Mr. Clinton's second term," just as his approval ratings often seem to serve no purpose other than "deflecting an impeachment proceeding."

The authority to do *great* things requires a stronger relation between people and president, one in which we give our allegiance and our willingness to sacrifice, but in which we receive moral assurance and personal responsibility from those who lead us into new ways and times. Presidents, acting for us—he took power, FDR said, "in the spirit of the gift"—mediate between convention and nature, the laws and the divine. Able to dispense mercy, presidents can bring down the apocalypse; at bottom, the presidency is hierophantic and tinted with regality, a truth partly captured in FDR's hyperbolic likening of his administration to Christ's driving the moneychangers from the temple. But the public price of that dangerous authority is the president's willingness to sacrifice his or her private self while in office, assuming a wholly public *persona*: In great monarchies, like the papacy, rulers often surrender their private names, just as high kings must be willing to die or to offer up those they love.

In liberal republics, the price of office, like its authority, is ordinarily not so steep. Still, if our rulers want to be taken seriously, they have to give up most of the liberty they would enjoy as private citizens. Above all, they have to show personal respect for the forms, for the very conventions and laws that a president's extra-legal public power may have to repair or reform.

At the beginning of American national life, there were strayings among the Framers. Assuming that all the charges against Clinton are true, Alexander Hamilton—"a sexual libertine," John Adams called him—was probably his match, though certainly more graceful in his predations. But when Hamilton was accused of winking at or collaborating in the corrupt schemes of his paramour's husband in order to cover up the affair, he chose to publish a self-reviling confession, sacrificing his private character to preserve the honor of his public conduct and policy. It's an example the current president has so far been unable to appreciate, let alone follow.

Bill Clinton is genuinely engaging, and even his misdeeds suggest a Tom Sawyerish kind of mischief, the sometimes very hurtful frivolities of a basically good kid. But kings who are children have always been bad omens, and the presidency of the United States is cut to an adult's measure. We will need to do better next time. □

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A FAITH LOOSELY HELD

The institutional allegiance of young Catholics

William Dinges
Dean R. Hoge
Mary Johnson
Juan L. Gonzales, Jr.

The demise of religious traditions is about the loss of the young, not the death of the old. The present is the future. Young adults—those twenty through thirty-nine years of age—now constitute nearly 40 percent of America's 60 million Catholics. They are a large segment of the 20 million or so Catholics who appear disconnected from their tradition, that is, who do not attend Mass regularly or have no official parish connection. These young adults are the people who will primarily transmit the faith to yet another generation. There are mixed views on their fervor and commitment: Will they pass on the faith and how will they do it?

The bleakest scenario portrays many young adult Catholics as having a weak, "hollowed out," or "vague" sense of Catholic identity. James Davidson and his fellow authors suggest in a recent study, *The Search for Common Ground* (OSV Press, 1997), that many are less committed to institutional Catholicism, more likely to be disconnected from the church's tradition, less aware of God's presence in their lives, less knowledgeable about the church's teaching, more impoverished regarding its symbol system, more selective in appropriating doctrine and discipline, and more imbued with the American "Lone Ranger" approach to spirituality. These Catholics might be considered the religious version of the so-called "slackers" of Generation X—"in the church but not of it" (*see* Paul Elie, "The Everlasting Dilemma: Young Catholics & the Church," *Commonweal*, September 27, 1991).

Not everyone agrees, however. Andrew Greeley insists that there is nothing in his NORC data to suggest that the generation of Catholics who have grown up since the Second Vatican Council "are any less loyal, any less committed, any less devout than their predecessors" (*The Catholic Myth*, Scribners, 1990). John Coleman, another sociological observer of the American Catholic scene, also attributes much of the purported detachment of young adult Catholics to the "life cycle" syndrome. With marriage and families comes a more connected Catholicism (*see* John A. Coleman, S.J., "Young Adults: A Look at the Demographics," *Commonweal*, September 14, 1990). The American bishops in a recent document on the topic, "Sons and Daughters of the Light," also take a more upbeat view, although they acknowledge that ministry to young adults is a serious lacuna in many parish settings.

As part of a larger effort to learn more about young adult Catholics, our research team commissioned a telephone survey of a random sample of self-identified Catholics twenty to thirty-nine years old. The purpose was to get information on young Catholics' attitudes about priorities and boundaries in Catholic identity. Which elements of Catholicism are seen as the most central and essential, and which are seen as marginal or optional? What kinds of boundaries do young Catholics think need to be maintained in defining what it means to be Catholic?

Essential Elements of Catholicism

A key question in the survey asked: "I have some questions about different elements of the Catholic faith. Some of these elements of the faith may be more important to you than others. How essential is each element of your vision of what the Catholic faith is?"

Who were polled?

The sample was composed of 701 persons who said that their religious preference today is Catholic. Forty-nine percent were male. Ninety-four percent were raised Catholic and 5 percent were converted as adults. Out of the persons raised Catholic, 86 percent were confirmed in the church. Forty-two percent had attended a Catholic grade school, 20 percent a Catholic high school, and 9 percent a Catholic college. Twenty-seven percent had earned a college degree or more education. Thirty percent reported a family income of $50,000 or more. Thirty percent said that in the last year they had attended Mass once a week or more, on average. Twenty-seven percent were Hispanic and 4 percent were black. Forty-nine percent were currently married, and 30 percent had never been married.

William Dinges *is associate professor of religious studies, The Catholic University of America, where* **Dean R. Hoge** *is professor of sociology.* **Mary Johnson, S.N.D. de N.,** *is associate professor of sociology at Emmanuel College, Boston.* **Juan L. Gonzales, Jr.,** *is professor of sociology at California State University, Hayward. This article is the first report on a study of young adult Catholics.*

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This question assumes a hierarchy of truths stemming from revelation. Some theologians and sociologists use a "kernel" versus "husk" metaphor to make this distinction, which assumes that Catholicism is dynamic in its theological, liturgical, and doctrinal development. Thus tradition is composed of many diverse elements acquired over the centuries. The discernment of what is core and peripheral also addresses the problem of making absolute what is historically incidental or culturally conditioned. Modern-day believers, trying both to interpret the tradition while engaging the contemporary world (à la H. Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture*), will sort out and rank various elements. Members of any religious tradition, especially in a period of dramatic social change, feel the need to make such judgments. In this context, much of the concern surrounding Catholic identity is a process of shifting priorities rather than a loss of faith, per se (*see* figure 1).

Young Adult Catholic Survey

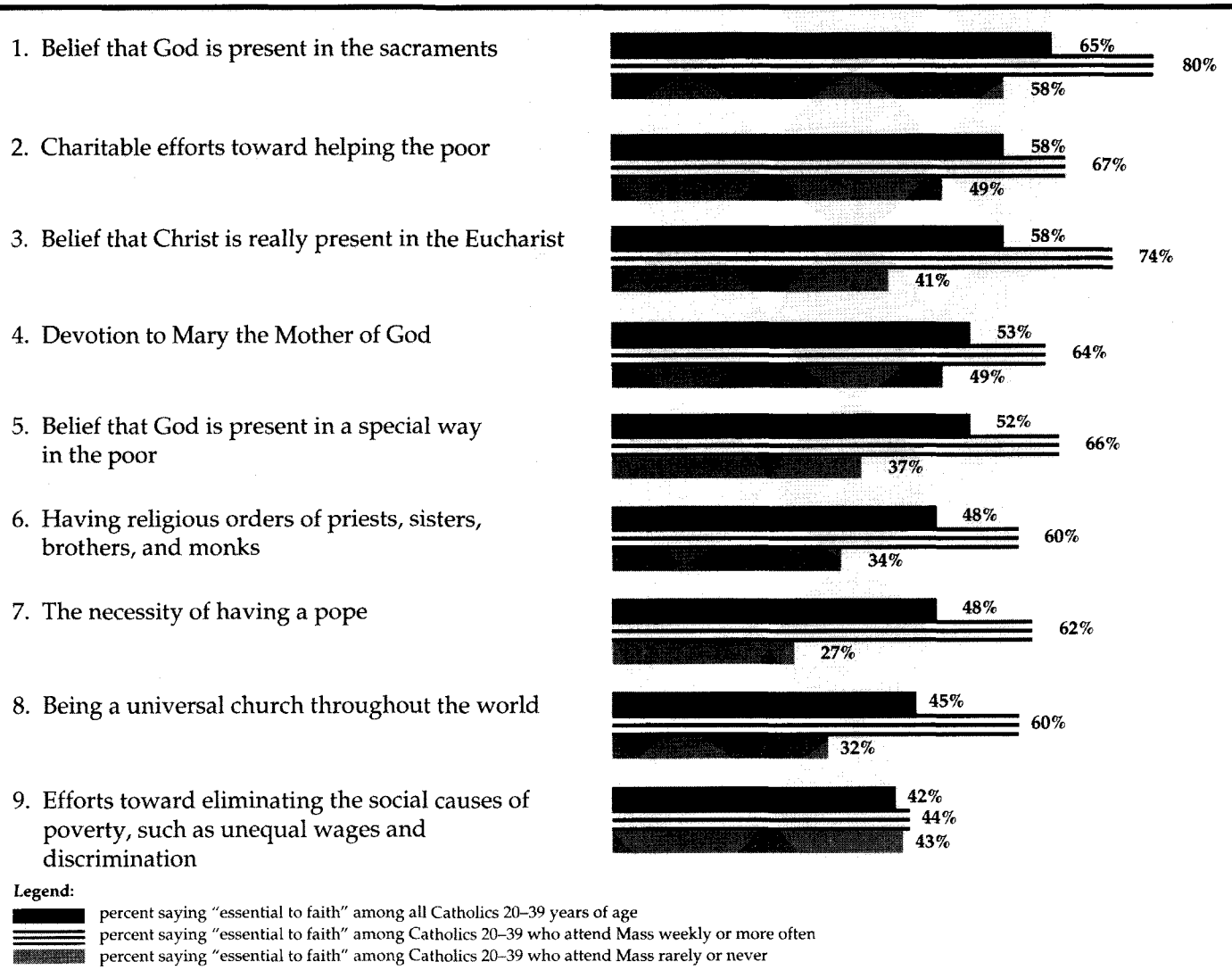
The results of our survey, as summarized in figure 1, suggest that religious identity for young adult Catholics rests on three basic elements:

- belief that God is present in the sacraments (including Christ's presence in the Eucharist);
- charitable efforts toward helping the poor;
- devotion to Mary.

Moderately important are the church's present institutional arrangements. Least important are specific moral teachings and specific rules about the priesthood. It is also clear in figure 1 that weekly Mass attendance weighs heavily in the tendency of young Catholics to rank all elements as "more significant," although the causal direction of this relationship remains unclear. We do not know

Figure 1. Essential Elements of Catholicism among Catholics, 20-39

How essential is each of these elements to *your* vision of what the Catholic faith is?



Legend:

- percent saying "essential to faith" among all Catholics 20–39 years of age
- percent saying "essential to faith" among Catholics 20–39 who attend Mass weekly or more often
- percent saying "essential to faith" among Catholics 20–39 who attend Mass rarely or never

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whether belief sparks attendance or *vice versa*.

God's Presence in the Sacraments

The high ranking of the belief in "God's presence in the sacraments" substantiates the common-sense observation that committed Catholics take the church's sacramental tradition seriously. It suggests the power of the physical and relational character of Catholic worship. It also supports the claim (of Greeley, Tracy, Kennedy, and others) that Catholics have a "sacramental imagination" that differentiates them from Protestants in important ways and that keeps them connected to the church in spite of the discontent some may experience with its juridical and doctrinal teachings.

Although this "sacramental imagination" appears to rank high in Catholic identity, the question of its durability remains uncertain. It is not obvious how the coherence or common understanding of the Catholic "sacramental imagination" will be sustained, given that many young adults do not have a shared historical experience or lack a significant web of Catholic social relationships and overlapping memberships that might function as "plausibility structures." Their low rate of Mass attendance does not augur well in this regard. It is also not obvious that the "sacramental imagination" will continue to have any necessary connection with Catholic institutional identity, per se. The cultural influences of contemporary American society weigh heavily here.

America's spiritual emporium is a wide-open one. Numerous studies have shown that spirituality has become increasingly disconnected from institutional religion. The proliferation of do-it-yourself enlightenment suggests a widespread conviction that, while religious institutions may initially provide individuals with an imaginative symbolic

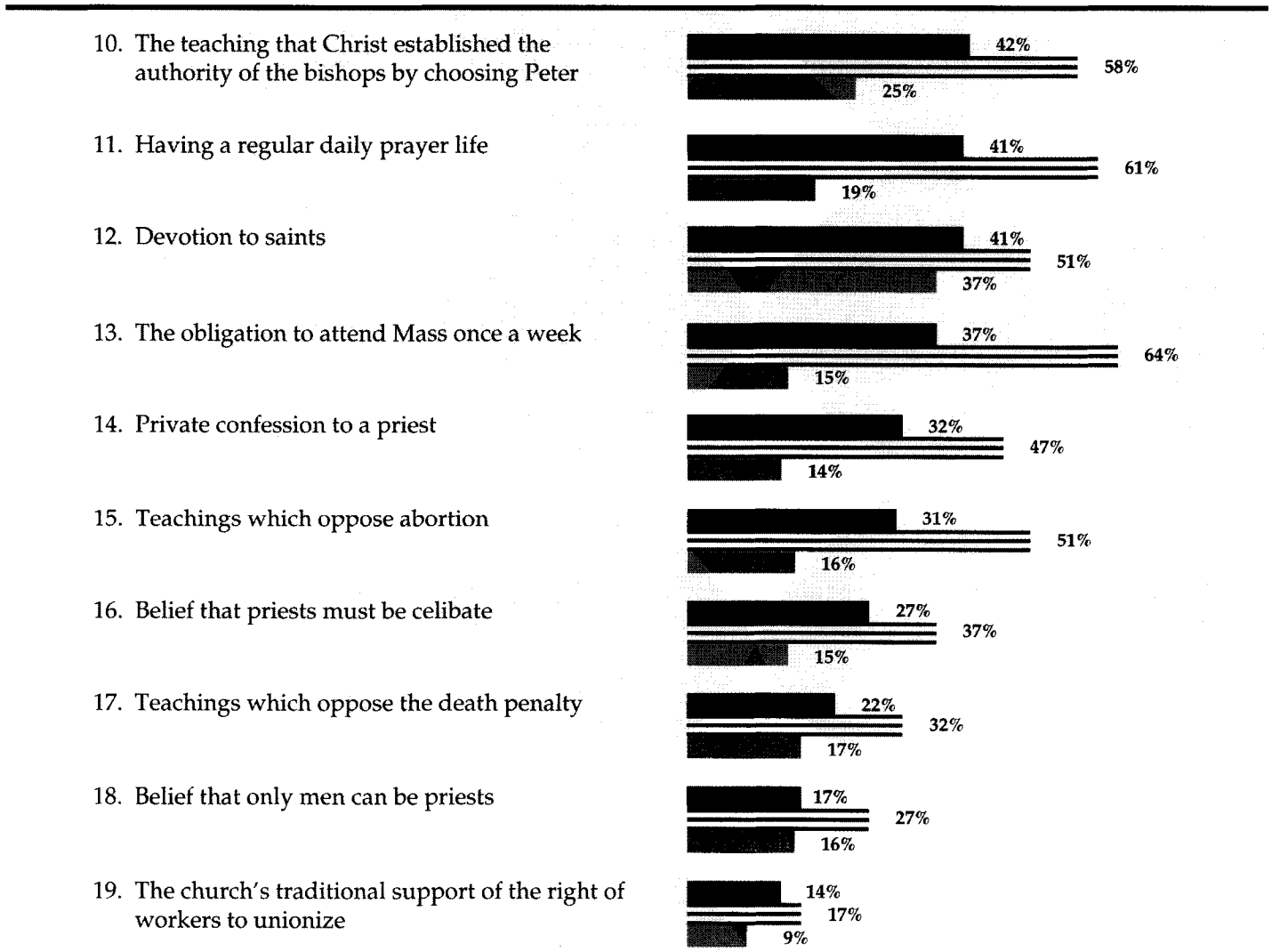

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Table 1

In percents	Should never be changed	Could be changed	Never heard of rule	Don't know
The rule that non-Catholics should not be allowed to partake in the Eucharist	45	36	13	6
The rule that lay persons and non-Catholics are not allowed to preach the homily or sermon during Mass	39	37	18	6

imagery that brings them closer to ultimate questions, these same institutions seem to have no (or very little) compelling social necessity in their lives. Indeed, the culture seems to regard organized religion as harmful to the spiritual quest because of organized religion's penchant for control, dogmatism, and authoritarian rigidity. Young adult Catholics are not immune to such influences.

In addition, the impact of tendencies toward a more horizontal and rationalist approach to liturgy and of the decline in traditional modes of Catholic devotional piety on the durability of the "sacramental imagination" remains unclear. The continuing attachment of young adult Catholics to the church—accompanied by a relatively low level of regular Mass attendance—may suggest a "high holy day" syndrome, in which Catholic identity comes in the form of sporadic sacramental ritualization beyond which there are few attachments or commitments capable of actually sustaining a "sacramental imagination."

■ Charitable Efforts toward Helping the Poor

Commitment to the poor has become an important component of postconciliar Catholicism. Vatican II's call for a more concrete commitment to "the world"; the "preferential option for the poor"; the emergence of liberation theology; and an emphasis on social-justice issues and community service in religious education over the last thirty years have done much to raise Catholic consciousness. This conviction about helping the poor, along with the belief that "God is present in a special way in the poor," can be counted among the successes of postconciliar Catholic religious education. It is also clear that the church would do well to provide greater opportunities for service initiatives and a grounding in social-justice teachings, both as a means of fulfilling its public ministry and as a means of linking the young to its institutional life.

Noteworthy also is the response to another item in our survey asking about specific social action affecting the causes of poverty: "Efforts toward eliminating the social causes of poverty, such as unequal wages and discrimination," ranked ninth out of nineteen. In agreement with all other research, charitable efforts were given more support than substantive social-justice efforts to improve the lives of the poor. It appears that young Catholic laity are more influenced by the individualist ethos of practicing "charity" than by calls for structural analysis of social change.

Here, too, difficulties arise in regard to the issue of Catholic identity. While "helping the poor" can be viewed as essential to Catholic identity, it is not clear that it is a distinctive component of that identity. "Helping the poor," after all, can be driven by any number of motives extrinsic to anything uniquely "Catholic." Atheists and Unitarians are social activists, too. Moreover, in the broader American social context, "helping the poor" has become a generic norm of "good citizenship." It is also part of a tendency—evident in the historical trajectory of mainline Protestantism—to reduce religion to moral and ethical behavior, thereby diminishing its

Table 2

In percents	Strongly agree	Moderately agree	Don't know	Moderately disagree	Strongly disagree
The Catholic church is more faithful to the will of Christ than other Christian churches	15	28	7	25	25
In their main beliefs, Catholics today are essentially no different than Protestants	11	37	12	27	13
The Catholic church demands more of its members than other Christian churches do	25	30	6	25	14

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sacramental and ritual character and reducing denominational identity to a secondary or instrumental role.

Devotion to Mary

Devotion to Mary as the mother of Jesus is a part of the Catholic tradition that has not waned significantly in the decades following Vatican II—in spite of the council's implicit diminishment of Mary in the Catholic economy of salvation. The cult of the Virgin Mary continues to find enduring expressions and forms in various cultural settings. Mary is a central icon of the "Catholic imagination," to use Greeley's phrase, who reveals the passionate love of God.

That Mary remains high on the list of essential and unifying symbols of Catholic identity may be attributed to several causes: the media visibility of John Paul II's unabashed Marian piety; the proliferation of Marian apparitions and devotionalism at the level of popular religious culture; and the Virgin's centrality in Catholic ethnic culture. Mary is also one of the most ubiquitous icons in Catholic material culture (churches, statues, rosaries). Her image also serves in contemporary culture as a mother symbol or symbol of the feminine dimension of God. She also remains a distinctive marker of Catholic identity given the decline in the knowledge of and perceived value of devotion to the saints.

More significant than these factors, Mary's role as a marker of Catholic identity contrasts sharply with the flattening of denominational distinctions and with the tendency on the part of young adult Catholics to deny substantive theological differences between Catholics and Protestants (*see* table 2). Devotion to Mary, therefore, remains one of the few elements of a distinctive Catholic identity in the face of diminishing theological and liturgical distinctions between mainstream expressions of the Christian tradition.

Institutional Considerations

Nearly half of our respondents ranked "the necessity of having a pope" and "having religious orders" as essential to their vision of Catholicism. However, other institutional measures on the scale ("Christ established authority of bishops," "obligation to attend Mass," "private confession to a priest") were ranked lower.

These responses can be interpreted as reflecting the internalization of Vatican II's emphasis on the laity as constituent of "church" and not merely adjuncts to the hierarchy, "children" needing to be saved, or a "bridge" between the church and the world. They also point—as have other surveys—to a weakening institutional sense of Catholic identity. This development has long-term implications for priestly vocations, lay ministry, the development and enhancement of spirituality outside parish communities, and the church's authority as a public witness.

The Mass and Catholic Distinctiveness

Our survey data (*see* figure 1) also indicate that Mass attendance plays a key role among our sample respondents, not only as an indicator of higher levels of attachment

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to all components of Catholicism, but also as a way through which Catholics maintain their ecclesial boundaries. For example, 45 percent believe that the prohibition of non-Catholics partaking of the Eucharist "should never be changed." In addition, Mass attendance also functions as a distinctive marker of identity issues within the church: 39 percent think the prohibition against lay and non-Catholic preaching at the homily "should never be changed" (*see* table 1).

Statements about the church as a distinct institution, however, yielded mixed results. Half of the respondents do not believe that the Catholic church "is more faithful to the will of Christ than other Christian churches." Nearly as many (48 percent) also believe that when it comes to their core beliefs, "Catholics today are essentially no different than Protestants." These responses suggest that many young adult Catholics are losing a sense of being different. Why, then, be Catholic?

These latter views may reflect the impact of ecumenical initiatives over the last four decades, along with Catholicism's official but belated embrace of the principle of religious liberty. From a cultural perspective, they also suggest the pervasiveness of "transdenominationalism," the postmodern view that denominational identities are essentially interchangeable—or incidental to being a "good person." For the good person, a benevolent moral orientation rather than creed, doctrine, liturgy, or institutional affiliation is the defining criterion of religious sensitivity. Catholic identity for such a person—to use a phrase currently in vogue in many Catholic quarters—amounts to little more than a matter of "Christian lifestyle."

Somewhat surprisingly in this regard, little attention has been drawn to the fact that in the context of contemporary multiculturalism, there is a heightened awareness of and a celebratory emphasis on differences of race, gender, sexual orientation, and so forth. When it comes to religion, however, the tendency has been to minimize differences and reduce religious distinctions to the lowest common theological denominator—all the while celebrating "religious pluralism" as an earmark of American society. This homogenization of religion has been compounded by the privatization of religious beliefs and attitudes in which much of the contemporary religious life of Americans, including among Catholics, is embedded.

It is also noteworthy that we found that although young adult Catholics have a weak sense of the salience of Catholic identity, they have a rather strong tendency (55 percent) to perceive that "the Catholic church demands more of its members than other Christian churches do."

Conclusion

Our survey was designed to get information on priorities, boundaries, and rules associated with religious identity among young adult Catholics. The most important finding is the rank of nineteen elements telling us that young adults see the sacraments and commitment to the poor as the most essential parts of Catholic faith. Institutional rules and arrangements are ranked as less essential, and specific moral teachings even less so. Teachings on abortion, the death penalty, and the right of workers to unionize are regarded as peripheral. When we ask young adults what it really means to be a Catholic today, the main answers consist of receiving the sacraments and having a commitment to the poor.

How high and strong are the present-day boundaries of Catholicism? Only moderately high. Catholicism, however, is seen as demanding more.

The issue of Catholic identity is problematic today because the historical and cultural circumstances in which that identity took shape have changed. The religious hostility and (Euro-American) ethnic identity that undergirded Catholic unity and discipline throughout much of the American experience have largely disappeared. Alterations in the Catholic class structure, the weakened authority structure in the church, and a postmodern setting marked by multiculturalism, privatization, relativism, and do-it-yourself spirituality have contributed to the problem, as has a societal decline of confidence in and identification with institutions of any kind. The challenge for Catholic leadership is to convince young adults that in such a postmodern climate, there is no reason to apologize or hesitate to take measures to promote the distinctiveness and value of Catholic identity. A second challenge is to be forthright about what is indeed essential to the Catholic faith and what is a matter of spiritual or moral advice. The items low in figure 1 are already seen as optional by young Catholics, so educators now have a reading on present-day attitudes which need further attention.

The question of Catholic identity in the contemporary cultural context is a complex and dynamic one. It should not be assumed that the changes noted in our survey data are—in any erroneous *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* fashion—the consequences of assimilation and Vatican II. It can be, and has been, argued that the figures might be even lower had it not been for these developments. Although the data we have assembled do not explain what caused the changes noted, our own reflections suggest the existence of two great ironies in our recent history. The first is that tolerance and assimilation may in the long run prove more lethal to maintaining a coherent Catholic identity than persecutions and the minority status of the past. Catholics are not alone in this regard; it is a problem not unlike the current concern over the fate of Jewish identity in American society.

The second is that it has been precisely a number of the notable successes of Vatican II (ecumenism, engaging "the world," lay empowerment, religious tolerance, recognizing the ecclesial nature of non-Catholic Christian denominations) that have made Catholic postconciliar institutional identity more problematic. So much for the principle of unintended consequences—with a vengeance. □

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Richard Alleva

HERO FOR OUR TIME?

'Wilde'

The very first scene of *Wilde* promises us that scriptwriter Julian Mitchell and director Brian Gilbert don't intend to coast on the fact that their hero's life was filled with glittering and tragic incidents, but mean to find among those incidents (culled from Richard Ellmann's great biography) the shape and point and impact of a coherent drama.

Young Oscar Wilde is on a lecture tour of the American West. In Leadville, Colorado, he descends a mine shaft named in his honor where he lectures the bare-chested, begrimed toilers on Benvenuto Cellini, a "genius at life." Encouraged by their good-natured reception, he confesses that while being lowered into the bowels, "I thought I was descending into hell until I saw your angelic faces." Everything in this scene—the glamorously burnished darkness, the hushed attentiveness that coaxes the audience-hungry author to display his feelings, the shy homoerotic glance he gives a young miner, and, most of all, the words he speaks—adumbrates the hero's fate.

Wilde will return to London, enjoy brilliant theatrical and literary success while also trying to be a "genius at life," marry a loving wife who bears him two boys, discover and enact his homosexuality, first with nonthreatening disciples and then with the infinitely desirable and infinitely despicable Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas, who leads Wilde into sleeping with male prostitutes. This utterly loveless (and therefore undilutedly sexual) world of "rent boys" (or "renters") had always attracted Wilde while filling him with dread. But once he's in this hell he abides for the sake of the angelically beautiful Bosie. And after losing his lawsuit against Bosie's father, pressed only on Bosie's behalf to punish the hated Marquess of Queensberry, the rent boys become the state's prime evidence against Wilde. Then it's hell indeed for Oscar: the ruin of his career and reputation, the loss of his family, imprisonment in Reading Gaol.

The well-researched, well-upholstered look of this film befits the story of a man devoted to the life of the senses. But what stays in the memory aren't costumes or dinner services but the many sudden emotional revelations: Wilde's confession to a friend that his wife is receptive but not responsive, a remark meant to describe conjugal conversations but which unconsciously defines their sex life as well; the unease on the faces of tacit waiters and hotel staff as Wilde and his boys flaunt their sexual natures in public places (one senses behind those poker faces the public outrage to come); Queensberry, having found Oscar likable during an early meeting, suddenly pushing all reconciliation out of his mind while snarling, "But perverts like that shouldn't be charming, dammit!"; the reverberating questions smothered by chit-chat when Constance Wilde arrives unannounced at her husband's townhouse only to find Oscar breakfasting with Lord Alfred; and—perhaps the most piercing moment of all—Oscar's last public triumph as he receives the audience's roar of approval on the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, his face so refulgent with the moment's triumph that you know he has nowhere to go in life but down.

Stephen Fry doesn't project the intellectual dangerousness of Wilde but, then again, neither does the script. One would never guess from this film that André Gide believed his soul was "destroyed" by his brief acquaintance with the Irishman, so thoroughly do Mitchell and Gilbert replace the near-nihilistic picador who goaded established morality with something closer to a hygienic version of Brendan Behan. But within the movie's narrow concept of Wilde, Fry gets everything right: the pride, the slightly naive sensuality, the inalienable graciousness (listen to his tone of voice as he corrects an actor at rehearsal). In the postprison scenes, Fry neatly conveys the toll Reading Gaol took, not by faking haggardness with make-up, but by giving Wilde the air of an ox stunned by an ax-stroke.

The rest of the cast is perfect. Jude Law doesn't just flaunt male beauty but also projects what motivated Bosie: the underlying insecurity of a despised son. Jennifer Ehle, who bugged me with her unending twinkliness in the A&E *Pride and Prejudice*, realizes Constance Wilde subtly: initially a gorgeous milkmaid citified, gradually a disturbed wife, finally a tragic matron. The reason that Queensberry is so frightening in this movie is that he's played not as an out-of-control

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mad dog but as a controlled mad dog: Tom Wilkinson finds the method within the Marquess's madness. Vanessa Redgrave seems to understand that Wilde's mother was almost as crazy but in a benevolent way. As the loyal Robert Ross, Michael Sheen conveys sweetness without the least tincture of smugness.

But for all the pleasure *Wilde* yields scene by scene, does it really achieve the overall coherence that the opening scene promises? I think not. It's clear that the filmmakers are fascinated by their hero and are aware of his complexity, but from time to time they seem nonplussed by that same complexity, and their confusion causes them to send incoherent signals to the audience.

For instance, they set up a moralistic parallel between Wilde's fairy tale, "The Selfish Giant," and its author's own conduct. As readers might recall, the giant's garden is blighted until its owner learns generosity. So, when Oscar neglects his family to cavort with Bosie and rent boys, we hear Fry's voice on the soundtrack reading those sections of the story about selfishness. And when Wilde temporarily drops Lord Alfred to devote more time to wife and sons, we hear Fry's voice narrating the giant's redemption. O.K., that's logical if a bit too tidy. But then, when Wilde returns to Bosie, are we not to understand that as a return to selfishness even if we hear nothing more of the story on the soundtrack? And at the end of the movie, Wilde's life in ruins precisely because of Bosie, his wife dying miserably for lack of the expensive operation she needed precisely because of Bosie, the children abandoned to foster parents precisely because of Bosie, Wilde reunites with his *inamorato* in Naples, embraces him, and the strings on the soundtrack surge up for the lovers just as jubilantly as they did for Troy Donahue and Suzanne Pleshette in *Rome Adventure* or Audrey Hepburn and George Peppard in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. What are we to make of this? A printed epilogue immediately following informs us that the couple split up two months later, but those strings convey neither foreshadowing nor irony. Are we to take the Wilde-Douglas romance as we take that of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra, that is, the world well lost for love? But while Cleo followed her Roman into Hades, Bosie abandoned Oscar for country villas, his mother's allowance, and spiteful memoirs. Or are we to think that the filmmakers are endorsing selfishness for the sake of self-realization, however momentary? Oscar, at least in his prime, would have approved that notion, for he thought self-realization desirable at all costs. But he would have been consistent and dispensed with all the moralizing that Julian Mitchell and Brian Gilbert lay on us in the first two-thirds of this very interesting, handsome, worthwhile but not quite coherent film. □

BOOKS

James Madison, doctor of the church

The Lustre of Our Country
The American Experience of Religious Freedom
John T. Noonan, Jr.
University of California Press, $35, 430 pp.

John McGreevy

That Judge John T. Noonan, Jr., should write a book whose hero is James Madison marks a certain moment in both American legal and Catholic intellectual history. Noonan's remarkable career has placed him at the center of both traditions. Currently sitting on the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, Noonan is a former chairholder at the Boalt Law School of the University of California at Berkeley, a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences as well as the Harvard Board of Overseers, and a towering figure in Catholic intellectual and legal circles. Recently, he has authored a sharp attack on the "right" to physician-assisted suicide and participated in the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin's Catholic Common Ground initiative. His scholarly achievements defy casual summary, but a sustained interest in the development of Catholic doctrine has led to a series of important books on topics as disparate as bribes and annulments. In Rome for the heady days of the Second Vatican Council, Noonan also served as a primary scholarly adviser for the ill-fated papal commission that urged Paul VI to alter traditional Catholic teaching on artificial contraception.

But James Madison? As Noonan notes in the autobiographical, and moving, first chapter of *The Lustre of Our Country*, he began his scholarly career as a graduate student at The Catholic University in the 1940s, convinced that traditional church teaching on religious freedom was unassailable. A leading Catholic textbook of the time put the matter bluntly: "If there is only one true religion, and if its possession is the most important good in life for states as well as individuals, then the public profession, protection, and promotion of this religion, and the legal prohibition of all direct assaults upon it, becomes one of the most obvious and fundamental duties of the state." Popes and theologians agreed that error—that is, any non-Catholic belief—might be tolerated, but only out of charity. One afternoon, Noonan traveled to Maryland's Woodstock Jesuit Seminary where he argued the matter with John Courtney Murray. Murray's brilliance helped Noonan re-

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assess his position, but also prompted doubt about the veracity of his faith.

How the Catholic idea that "error has no rights" became viewed not only as implausible but immoral—in the United States, in Rome, and much of the world—is Noonan's subject. He begins in his native Boston, "cradle of liberty," where Puritans fleeing religious persecution commenced flogging, banishing, and hanging Quakers. He then moves to Madison's battle (first in Virginia, then after the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention) to replace the idea of religious tolerance with that of free exercise. Subsequent chapters offer different angles on the same problem, including a survey of the nineteenth-century religious landscape written in the voice of a fictional sister of Alexis de Tocqueville, and an engaging mock memoir by an American military officer charged with rewriting the Japanese constitution after World War II. Another chapter—written in traditional expository prose—traces the tortured legal maneuverings that resulted in the Supreme Court's terming the opinions of a small religious sect "humbug." The book concludes with a riveting summary of debates on religious liberty (here we reencounter Noonan's old sparring partner, John Courtney Murray) at the Second Vatican Council.

For a scholar once concerned about Catholic triumphalism, this is triumphal history. Free exercise, Noonan begins, is an American invention, and "no false modesty" or "nervous fear of chauvinism" should obscure this fact. Not only is it the lustre of our country, but it is also, according to the book's press copy, "America's greatest moral contribution to the world."

Such blanket statements tempt even the most generous reviewer, but Noonan builds a convincing argument. Free exercise is a distinctive American contribution to modern life, and its presence in many of the constitutions written around the world during the past decade testify to its continued importance. Interfaith cooperation on civic affairs, as well as high rates of religious intermarriage, are both (in part) legacies of this two-hundred-year experiment. And the contemporary Catholic must ac-

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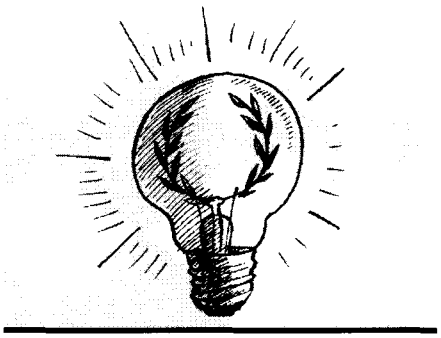
knowledge that the most important harbinger of John Paul II's persistent appeal to the primacy of human conscience is not, say, Gregory XVI who in 1832 termed "freedom of conscience" an "absurd and erroneous opinion," but James Madison, a devout Presbyterian deeply shaped by the Enlightenment. In this area, as in others, the more Christian response to the problem of religious pluralism came from outside Catholicism, even, at many moments, from outside Christianity itself.

The celebratory tone of Noonan's assertions, though, clash with his savvy discussion of the legal relationship between church and nation. Even in a nation dedicated to religious freedom, Noonan concedes, national interests frequently trump religious concerns. In the nineteenth century the Supreme Court declared a Mormon religious practice—polygamy—unconstitutional. In the twentieth century the Court deemed draft resisters from certain religious backgrounds worthy of an exemption from military service, but handed other opponents of the war their induction notices. Administrators at the Internal Revenue Service withdrew Bob Jones University's tax exempt status, despite the claim of Bob Jones officials that Scripture required them to forbid interracial dating.

Free exercise, then, has limits. Inevitably, the exercise of religious belief depends on a cultural consensus, enforced by the government, of what constitutes legitimate religious practice. Catholic priests were allowed to drink wine at Mass despite 1920s Prohibition laws, but today's Native Americans are not permitted to use peyote.

Noonan understands these tensions quite well, but he is relatively sanguine about the situation. He rejects the thinking of more radical theologians, for example, who view the church as the only meaningful social unit and who are convinced that the entire project of a national "community" is as plausible as the Loch Ness monster. That church leaders and religious people have at various moments supported slavery, wars of conquest, and ruthless attacks on Native Americans only confirms, in this



more radical view, the danger of church sympathy with national goals.

By contrast, Noonan admires the American civil religion that overlaps with that of specific churches and congregations, allowing believers to serve both Washington and God. Precisely this American sense that the nation is under God's judgment, Noonan argues, explains the success of nineteenth-century abolitionists and anti-Mormon agitators, as well as twentieth-century Prohibitionists and civil rights activists. These American "crusaders"—Noonan highlights abolitionist Theodore Parker and Martin Luther King, Jr.—usefully remind their fellow citizens that worship of God is more important than worship of nation. Once a crusade is completed, "Americans have come again together without those dark and bitter hatreds and ancient grudges still carrying a religious label in many parts of the world."

Noonan's list of crusaders, though, is incomplete. The most notable religious crusade of the past thirty years has been a powerful, grassroots anti-abortion effort. This crusade—or, depending upon one's viewpoint, *Roe* v. *Wade* itself—has placed an agonizing, ongoing strain upon our moral and legal institutions. The result, thankfully, is hardly chaos or religious warfare, but religion's meaning for American politics in the current moment is not summarized by what Noonan cheerfully terms "turmoil and civic strength." Few readers of *Commonweal*, or other journals of opinion, will deny Martin Luther King, Jr.'s status as the most important American of the latter part of this century, and surely our most important Christian witness. But the verdict on Operation Rescue, or upon the many religious people convinced that abortion should remain legal, is less self-evident.

The issue is not Noonan's own position on abortion—he authored a characteristically prescient discussion of the issue as early as 1970. Instead, the issue is whether the abortion dispute disrupts the narrative Noonan sketches of religious movements reminding the government and its citizens of higher values, and then helping to shape a renewed national consensus on controversial issues. It's a reassuring story, but one that would have seemed less persuasive to someone watching William Lloyd Garrison gleefully burn his copy of a Constitution that allowed slavery in the 1840s, and one that seems implausible today to anyone listening to the most heated voices on either side of the abortion controversy.

None of this diminishes Noonan's achievement. *The Lustre of Our Country* will immediately take its place as the most readable and informed history of religious freedom in the United States, as well as an illuminating survey of how an American ideal becomes embodied outside American borders. But precisely because Noonan is so convincing on the merits of free exercise, few readers will raise a voice in defense of religious establishments. Barring a sudden rehabilitation of Gregory XVI, that argument is over.

A more pertinent question, should Noonan turn his apparently inexhaustible energy toward a sequel, is the relationship between religious convictions and the nation-state. Put bluntly: American Catholics are more affluent and far more powerful than at any other time in their history, but some Catholic theologians, and, one might argue, John Paul II, have denounced the American government more vehemently than at any point in recent memory. How should Catholics—and indeed all citizens—understand this? Not a simple question, obviously, but John Noonan's unique familiarity with both Catholic and American intellectual life suggests his ability to provide a compelling answer. □

John McGreevy, *the author of* Parish Boundaries *(University of Chicago), teaches history at the University of Notre Dame.*

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A WELL-MEANING CANNIBAL

Consilience
The Unity of Knowledge
Edward O. Wilson
Alfred A. Knopf, $26, 322 pp.

Mary Midgley

Like the body of Osiris in the myth, our corporate store of knowledge is now being torn into a thousand pieces which are distributed among ever-growing crowds of specialists. Communally, we know more and more. But it becomes less and less clear who actually knows any part of it. Can we do anything to stop this fragmentation?

The sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson, rightly horrified by this situation, is making a proposal. Wilson is a scientist who really likes and respects the arts, so he is not just destructive. But in his quest for unity he is determined to combine arts and sciences inside a single formal system. He sees this kind of unification as an absolute demand of reason. And the system he chooses just happens to be the one now employed by modern science. He writes:

> There is intrinsically *only one class of explanation*. It traverses the scales of space, time, complexity to unite the disparate facts of the disciplines by consilience, *the perception of a seamless web of causes and effects*....Consilient explanations are congenial to the entirety of the great branches of learning.
>
> The central idea of the consilience world view is that all tangible phenomena, from the birth of stars to the workings of social institutions, are based on material processes that are *ultimately reducible, however long and tortuous the sequences, to the laws of physics* [emphasis mine].

All explanations, then, are causal explanations and all causes are material causes, so all questions are, at the deepest level, questions for physics. How does this require us actually to relate the arts with the sciences? Wilson's answer is always that we must bring the arts within the range of scientific methods. Thus, for instance:

> Artistic inspiration common to everyone in varying degree rises from the artesian wells of human nature....Creativity is therefore humanistic in its fullest sense. Works of enduring value are those truest to these origins. *It follows that even the greatest works of art might be understood fundamentally with knowledge of the biologically evolved epigenetic rules that guided them* [emphasis mine].

How will this work? It is not easy to see. When we try to understand, say, *War and Peace*, or *The Marriage of Figaro*, our efforts at understanding are not questions about causes at all. Those efforts set out in quite a different direction, inquiring directly about the meaning of the work itself. They ask how it shifts our general picture of life. They also look inward, reshaping our own ideas in response to that shift. We try, in fact, to see what this particular work is *saying*—indeed, despite the postmodernists, most of us try to see what this particular author is saying. The "understanding" that results is therefore not a causal story. Like much other understanding, it is essentially the imaginative grasp of a new pattern—a distinctive pattern of thought and feeling. People who cannot respond personally in this way to works of art notoriously do not understand them, whatever rules they may claim to have discovered.

Naturally, some grasp of facts does come in here as well, especially over literature. We need some knowledge of the historical and social background of these works. But, again, most of the relevant questions about that background are not causal questions in the sense used in the physical sciences. For instance, the aristocratic way of life that appears in both *War and Peace* and *The Marriage of Figaro* was indeed, historically speaking, one "cause" of both the French and Russian Revolutions. But historical causes like this are highly complex general influences, not standard entities linked to their effects by universal laws like the causes invoked in physics.

This point about multiple explanations is not (as Wilson seems to think) some vitalist fantasy, adding bogus extra-physical forces to the ordinary causal scene. Of course, normal causal processes are going on in people's bodies all the time. But those processes are just the relatively fixed background against which exceptional and complex social activities, such as works of art and revolutions, occur. They cannot explain those activities.

Similarly, no doubt our capacity for producing art did indeed develop according to the "biologically evolved epigenetic rules" that Wilson mentions. But these rules were general ones, facilitating every kind of art. Knowledge about them might answer general questions on how art as a whole evolved but could not help us to understand a particular artwork, any more than knowing how our mathematical faculties evolved could help us understand the calculus. Mathematicians are a different kind of expert from evolutionists. These two kinds of explanation do not compete. They supplement each other, lying in quite different directions.

The painful truth is that there are lots of kinds of explanation. The thought patterns which we use in understanding language, or in doing mathematics, or in trying to grasp each other's motives, or in historical research, or in responding to works of art, are not just superficial layers of folk psychology laid over a single basic pattern prescribed by physical science. Instead, they are appropriate devices evolved for dealing with many quite different kinds of human situation, only one of which confronts science.

Their plurality does not mean that we have a fragmented world. It is like the plurality which we find at the front of

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our atlases where many maps of the world—political, physiographic, climatological, and the rest—confront us without implying that we live in many worlds. Each map, each pattern, selects from the great welter of our experience the details needed for a certain aspect of our life. And what holds the various aspects together is not any imposed formal structure. It is simply their common context, the fact that life itself is a whole.

The idea of supplementing this moderate, realistic kind of unity by finding a single basic formal pattern was, of course, a cherished project of seventeenth-century rationalists in the early days of modern science. Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibnitz all worked on it with intense dedication and between them they exhausted its possibilities. Thereby they showed once and for all that this kind of formal unification is not workable and cannot, therefore, be demanded by reason. If the various provinces of our intellectual world are to work together usefully today—and by God they had better—they must do it by cooperating harmoniously, respecting each other's differences as separate enterprises. They cannot evade this by the kind of one-way assimilation which Wilson himself once rightly described as cannibalism.

Consilience is, on the whole, a much more charitable book and much better adapted to promote intellectual cooperation than Wilson's early work. The frankly cannibalistic academic imperialism of *Sociobiology* is gone. So is the distorted language of "selfishness." There is much fascinating discussion of the arts and much lively speculation about human nature—a much misunderstood notion which Wilson quite rightly defends—all fueled by a real wish for intellectual harmony. Yet there still remains a strange, unnecessary commitment to devices for unification which cannot work and which threaten that harmony. Since this kind of mistake is still widespread, it is very much to be hoped that Wilson overcomes it and writes us another vigorous book which will make real reconciliation possible. □

Mary Midgley *is the author of many books on philosophy, including* Science and Salvation *(Routledge, 1992).*

DIVINITY ON THE PAGE

God and the American Writer
Alfred Kazin
Alfred A. Knopf, $25, 272 pp.

Paul Elie

When it comes to God and literature, every critic is a cultural critic; the writers who take care to distinguish between life as it is lived in the East Village and in the West Village, between eastern and western South Dakota, between the Old Testament and the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish Publication Society edition of the *Tanakh*—those very writers will generalize blithely about the religious habits of the American people from olden times up to the present. There are those, like the Columbia University professor Andrew Delbanco, who read American literature as "a kind of national spiritual biography" and like to think of the great writers as our unelected representatives. There are those, like the gay Episcopalian Bruce Bawer, who have gotten religion and in the same moment have become convinced that the rest of America has gotten religion all wrong. And there are those, like Gregory Wolfe, the editor of a magazine called *Image* and a miscellany called *The New Religious Humanists* (Free Press), who are desperate to find the "religious humanists" of today and who see "religious humanism" as the cure for what ails us.

Religiously, however, there is no "we the people." The religious habits of the American people are "extremely fluid," as Flannery O'Connor once said of religion in the South, and so are the religious habits of American writers. Alfred Kazin, who died last month, understood this, and his last book serves to remind us that our greatest writers are found slightly off center in American history, as bystanders and observers rather than representatives.

The title of the book has the air of a working title, a couple of three-by-five cards stuck together with a piece of scotch tape. That is about right for the book, and for its author. In the years before his death, Kazin was honored as "our last great man of letters" (as he calls Edmund Wilson here), but in writing about God and American literature and the "shining points" where they intersect, he was refreshingly free of a great man's pomp and cant. Of the many recent books that touch on the subject, Kazin's is the least conclusive, and the best.

Really, Kazin is interested in the American writer and God, not the other way round. Not religion, but God—whom Emily Dickinson, the heroine of the book, called the maker of "these strange minds that enamor us against thee." Not American literature but American writers—the great American writers, such as Hawthorne and Melville, whom the latter called "God's spies." Kazin's object of concern is the writer as a whole person: the masterpieces and the lesser works, the journals and biographies, the recollections of others, and the impressions the writer left on later writers.

Kazin called his previous book *Writing Was Everything*, meaning that he and

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his contemporaries in the 1930s were obsessed with literature; but the book itself was one more statement of his lifelong credo, that writing is "everything" in its appetite for the fullness of life as it is really lived, its response to all of experience, from the broadest social movements to the smallest particulars of our individual lives, and that because of this the literary critic has to be open to the writing as a whole person—has to bring a whole life to the page. That's what Kazin did as a critic for fifty-five years, and that's what he does here. Two of the strongest passages in the book are Kazin's imaginative, sympathetic brooding over Melville's journals of his visits to the Holy Land ("Desert more fearful to look at than the ocean," said the author of *Moby-Dick*) and a recollection of his own midnight walks with Robert Frost in Amherst in the 1950s: Kazin would walk Frost home and then Frost, "one acquainted with the night" but one terrified of being alone, would walk back with him again and again.

Kazin knows his subject by heart, and he gives it to us through aphorism, anecdote, quotation, close reading, comparison, and broad insight. He tells us that Edmund Wilson was descended from the Mathers, that nine generations of Emerson's ancestors were Congregational ministers, that T.S. Eliot's grandfather was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, the whaling town where *Moby-Dick* begins. Melville said he had written the novel "just to buy tobacco with," but he described it unforgettably as having "the horrible texture of a fabric that should be woven of ships' cables & hawsers." We learn that Hawthorne's wife considered their sex life ample evidence of the divinity, and that Hawthorne himself thought Thoreau "ugly as sin." As for Thoreau, Kazin remarks, "He described Walden Pond as if he had baptized himself in its waters."

Kazin argues that the Civil War was the religious turning point in the history of the country and that Lincoln's "feeling for the Union amounted to 'religious mysticism," but he is more interesting on the ways in which nineteenth-century ardor gave way to twentieth-century hesitations. Of Melville, Kazin observes, "He retained faith even if he did not always know what and where and whom to believe," and adds laconically, "An agony in the nineteenth century, wistful confession in the twentieth." That is as good a description as any of the change in religious mores from that century to this, and the rest of the book can be read as a gloss on it. William James, we are told, saw "religion as therapy" and man as "a creature always in crisis," about which Kazin remarks: "Not 'ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set ye free,' but just give up your anxious self for a moment." A little later he says, a trifle wistfully: "As things go nowadays, you might almost say that 'religion' as a subject of the most intense personal interest has replaced 'God,' which after all is or is not a matter of objective existence or truth—or so it used to be."

What did Kazin himself believe? When he tries to define religion, what he comes up with—"the axis of reality that goes through personal existence"—is brittle and unconvincing. Kazin's complaint about Eliot's religiosity is that it

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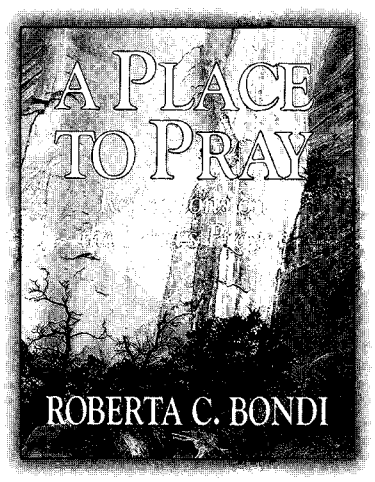

Bondi contends that Christians are called to love God and our neighbors as ourselves, and that the Lord's Prayer, prayed honestly from the places we really are, is a basic tool to help us do it. In these letters to a fictional friend Bondi draws on her own experiences, teaching, and study of the early church to address the issues that make praying the Lord's Prayer difficult for many persons today. At the same time, she helps readers use the prayer as a means of helping them love God, neighbor, and self.

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led to a bookish narrowing of his sensibility, rather than an expansion of it; and in the same way, Kazin is reduced by his own definition.

Better and more representative are his remarks about Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." For Kazin, the great poet's address to his future reader is a line thrown across the generations with the force of a biblical promise. "It is his constant call to himself to 'merge and merge again'—by no means just as a lover—that has won me all my life to Whitman's rapture here," he explains. "'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' brings together earth, water, and sky into a wonder of space that alternates time now and time future like the tidal rise and fall of the East River. As the future awaits the present, so there is something in *looking* that enables us to recognize our own soul....This is what we can at last call proof of an American religion."

As Lincoln felt about America, so Kazin felt about American literature. His feeling for literature amounted to religious mysticism. What did he believe? In a sense, he believed all the things in this book—the best that has been thought and said about God by the great American writers. In a lesser writer that would have been a slack and irresponsible position, but here Alfred Kazin, who not only knew American literature through and through but lived through it, makes literature, for the moment, something to believe in. □

Paul Elie *is a frequent contributor to* Commonweal.

AN INEXHAUSTIBLE TEXT

The Bible as It Was
James L. Kugel
Harvard University Press, $35, 647 pp.

Luke Timothy Johnson

Some graduate students and I gathered once a week during the last academic year—just for fun—to read Genesis in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. No rough stuff or higher criticism, merely the joy of mucking about with the Masoretic text and trying to figure out how the Septuagint and Vulgate got from the Hebrew to their versions, which often looked more like interpretations than translations. We could have used James Kugel's book, which engages the reader in just this sort of intellectual exercise, but does so without demanding knowledge of any ancient languages, and in a prose so sweetly reasonable that daunting scholarship gets spooned out as the delight of discovery.

At the most superficial level, *The Bible as It Was* is an anthology of ancient interpretations of Torah—the first five books of the Bible—drawn from Jewish and Christian sources. As such, it offers rich resources for the study of comparative scriptural interpretation. At a deeper level, this book invites readers into a world that is imaginatively shaped by the reading and study of the Bible as a source of wisdom and life. As such, it not only reminds us of a deeper and broader tradition of biblical study than the profoundly amnesiac version called the historical-critical, but provides a sense of what that older tradition might still offer.

In his first chapter ("The World of Ancient Biblical Interpreters") Kugel establishes the framework for the materials he has collected. His concern is not the process by which the biblical texts came into existence, but the process by which they entered into the lives of readers through interpretation. Interpretation of the Hebrew text was necessary from the first, not only because changing circumstances demanded adaptation, but also because the language of the Bible was itself so peculiarly susceptible of multiple readings. From the start, interpretation was carried out by priests, prophets, and sages; indeed, many later compositions within the Bible represent interpretations of earlier texts through what has been termed "inner-biblical exegesis."

This living conversation with the text continued in the oral discussions and the literary compositions of Judaism and Christianity. Between the third century B.C. and the third century A.D., interpreters in diverse geographical, social, and ideological locations sought to ground their identity and their practices by appeal to these texts. Because the interpreters were often disputants within the same symbolic world of Torah, their interpretations helped create a scriptural world that was larger than the texts themselves.

Kugel notes how in spite of their many superficial disagreements, all ancient interpreters shared four basic premises. First, the Bible is "a fundamentally cryptic document": What it says and what it means may not always coincide, but what it says is always a pointer guiding the interpreter to what it means. Second, Scripture is a unified "Book of Instruction, and as such is a *fundamentally relevant* text": The point of interpretation is not antiquarian but existential; the Bible is not a report from the past but a message to the present. Third, Scripture is "perfect and perfectly harmonious": Every part of the Bible can be read to understand every other part, for despite having many writers, it has a single voice; if understanding fails, it is not the fault of the text but of the interpreter, who has not sufficiently inquired into every word and letter of this endlessly giving text.

Putting these first three premises into operation means that biblical heroes, even when they seem to be doing something wicked, are really—when properly understood—doing something virtuous. Thus (in an example not included by Kugel but well known to Catholics), Augustine's cryptic comment on Jacob's deception of Isaac, "*non est mendacium sed mysterium*" ("It wasn't a lie but a mystery"). As this citation illustrates, the premises articu-

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"Somebody's going to get a break. I skipped a couple of commandments."

lated by Kugel were not confined to the Jewish interpreters of antiquity but were shared by all interpreters within Judaism and Christianity up until recently. This is at least in part because of the fourth premise, that "all of Scripture is somehow divinely sanctioned, of divine provenance, or divinely inspired": The Bible, in short, is God's Word in human language, and the task of interpretation is to discover God's message through deciphering the complexities of the language that encodes it.

Such premises lead naturally to a blurring of the boundaries between authoritative text and interpretation, as well as to the expansion of the biblical tradition. Why do we identify the serpent with the devil? Why do we assume Cain was wicked and Abel good? Why is homosexuality associated with Sodom? How do we know that the magicians opposing Moses in Pharaoh's court were Jannes and Jambres? How did Jacob predict the coming of the Messiah? How do we learn that God revealed both written and oral Torah to Moses on Sinai? The answer to these and a myriad other questions is *not* "because the Bible tells me so," for the Bible does not say any of these things as such; the Bible can, however, be read in such fashion as to mean these and many other things popularly thought to be contained within the texts themselves but in fact deduced from the texts by a process of interpretation and then "found" in the text by subsequent readers. Some such readers were translators, which is why the Septuagint, the Targums, and Jerome's Vulgate often expand the Hebrew text or turn it according to various exegetical traditions.

As Kugel acknowledges, his collection of interpretive materials bears some resemblance to Louis Ginzberg's anthology, *The Legends of the Jews* (Johns Hopkins Press). This one-volume edition is obviously shorter than Ginzberg's seven volumes (six of legends, one of references), even though Kugel promises a scholarly edition that should run to several volumes. There are more important differences. Kugel provides a much wider range of interpretive options, including in his repertoire apocrypha (notably Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon), rabbinic midrashim, apocalyptic (the Enoch literature, 2 Baruch, 4 Ezra, sybilline oracles), Jewish sectarian writings (especially impressive examples from Qumran), Hellenistic Jewish literature (not only Philo but also the rich evidence in the fragments of Aristobulus, Artapanus, Ezekiel the Tragedian, and others), and early Christian literature (New Testament and early patristic).

Not only is this an impressive—and modestly underplayed—display of erudition, but it provides students at every level of sophistication the materials for the analysis of comparative interpretive traditions. Fifty pages of an appendix on "Terms and Sources" provides a helpful guide to the readers for whom Artapanus and Eupolemus are as unfamiliar as Jannes and Jambres.

Most of all, Kugel differs from Ginzberg in the way he shows how the "legends" developed, not by random imagination, but by means of careful exegetical deduction. Here is the real intellectual thrill, to see how the "questions" posed by the notorious gaps, indirections, and obscurities of the Hebrew text led naturally—given the premises of its readers—to the sorts of "answers" gathered together in this volume. Kugel is a talented teacher, who successfully leads his readers through an imaginative reconstruction of the logic at work at every stage from text to traditions.

To mention only an example that my reading group also puzzled over: Genesis 6:3 reports God's resolution, "My spirit shall not abide in man for ever, for he is flesh, but his days shall be a hundred and twenty years." On the face of it, the text is erroneous, for many later biblical figures live much longer lives than 120 years (including Noah who lived to 950). So what does the text mean? Already the Septuagint translated, "my spirit shall not remain with *these men*," making the statement apply to the generation of the flood. The Septuagint reflects a larger tradition, which read Genesis 6:3 in light of other biblical texts and in light of the characterization of Noah as a righteous man, and concluded that Noah's righteousness was to be a warning to his contemporaries, and that the text therefore meant that the flood would come after 120 years of such witnessing. Thus 2 Peter 2:5 can say, "God preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness," even though the Bible as such never said that, and the early Christian epistle 1 Clement 7:6 can declare, "Noah preached repentance, and those who obeyed were saved."

Christian readers will naturally be drawn to the various narrative texts, but they may profit most from the chapters called "At Mt. Sinai" (on Exodus 19-24), "Worship in the Wilderness" (Leviticus 1 to Numbers 10), and "The Life of Torah" (Deuteronomy 1-34), for these sections offer splendid insight into the ways in which classical Judaism grounded itself in the legal texts of Torah and authorized its own rich tradition of interpretation.

Kugel concludes this volume with an afterword that sketches how the rise of critical biblical scholarship involved a completely different set of premises concerning the nature of the Bible, and became dominant not only by characterizing this entire long history of interpretation as erroneous, but by offering itself as the only reasonable way to approach the texts. He does not engage in any sustained polemic

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against the hegemonic impulses of the historical-critical approach, but proposes, reasonably enough, that any renewal of biblical theology must take this ancient tradition of reading, as well as its premises, into account. And Kugel's anthology, even in this first popular form, offers valuable resources for a fuller and more organic engagement with Scripture.

It should be obvious that I both admire and appreciate Kugel's accomplishment. But there is another side to the interpretive tradition he so masterfully sketches that also needs to be acknowledged, a side that is darker and more dangerous. Precisely the ways in which the readings of the text can stand as equally authoritative as the text itself, so that in some instances, it is impossible to disentangle them; precisely the ways in which communities have simply read their own ideologies into and out of the text without remainder; precisely the power given to tradition and its agents by their assimilating the text's inspiration and authority into their own—these are troublesome tendencies that have sometimes done damage to persons and communities of faith. To some extent, Kugel's placing of discrete and interested readings into contact with each other as parts of a larger conversation itself mitigates the ambiguous power of isolated and exclusionary interpretations. But it should also be acknowledged that these are also the tendencies against which the best in historical-critical scholarship fought when it sought to establish the "voice of the text" as something distinct from "the voice of tradition." If our new conversations are to broaden beyond the merely historical and include this tradition of reading that Kugel has so brilliantly presented—and I have recently argued in these pages (January 16) that it should—the historical-critical moment also should not be ignored but should in some fashion (it is not yet clear how) be dialectically incorporated. □

Luke Timothy Johnson *is the author of* The Real Jesus. *He is Robert W. Woodruff Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University.*

CORRESPONDENCE

(Continued from page 4)

erate in living cells. Second, evolutionary genetic change is a cellular process subject to regulation by these computational systems. This cell-biology view of genetic change is fundamentally different from the assumptions of neo-Darwinism and leads to alternative naturalistic hypotheses about the origin of complex adaptations. JAMES A. SHAPIRO

Chicago, Ill.

The writer is professor of microbiology in the department of biochemistry and molecular biology, University of Chicago.

The author replies:

I wrote that "*Scientifically*, Shapiro's program is identical to that of Michael Behe..." [emphasis added]. Professor Shapiro confirms that by saying that he sees intelligence manifest in living systems, that those systems are comparable to sophisticated computers, and that he agrees with Behe and me that the Darwinian mechanism was not adequate to design them. *Philosophically*, there is a difference. Shapiro still insists that the intelligence is a "natural phenomenon," so that it is not necessary to credit an Intelligent Designer.

That leaves the question, "What is the source of all that built-in intelligence?" In the case of computers, the source is an intelligent designer. This is true even though the computer, like the organism, is a material entity existing in the natural world. It is true even though one can speak loosely of the "evolution" of computer hardware and software—from DOS to Windows to Windows 95, for example. This is not evolution in the Darwinian sense, but the gradual development of a progressive design program. If organisms are truly like computers, then they were designed—by a Designer.

Much confusion can be avoided if we avoid pejorative words like "occult" and speak of the well-recognized difference between unintelligent (or "natural") causes and intelligent causes. In this sense a detective may say: "We thought at first that the victim had died of natural causes but discovered upon examination that he was murdered." A murderer is an intelligent cause of death; a spontaneous heart attack is not. When we find arsenic in the bloodstream we may reasonably conclude that there was a murderer, even though chemical analysis cannot tell us who it was. Similarly, Shapiro describes the "unanticipated realm of complexity and interaction" in cellular processes, which he says are "more consistent with computer technology than with the mechanical viewpoint which dominated when the neo-Darwinian Modern Synthesis was formulated...." To the unprejudiced, this description implies an intelligent source, especially when one understands that all efforts to find a materialistic alternative to neo-Darwinism have foundered. Professor Shapiro is within his rights to resist that conclusion, but his resistance comes from his philosophical outlook and not from what he knows as a biologist.

For a systematic treatment of the concept of intelligent design in science, I highly recommend *The Design Inference* by William Dembski, forthcoming from Cambridge University Press.

PHILLIP JOHNSON

Ours is not the 'gimme God'

In commenting on Chet Raymo's article on prayer, I claim no special theological or philosophical insights; I do, however, work where the rubber hits the road—that is, as a practicing scientist trying to figure out what, if anything, science has to do with God. The article was a noble attempt to move in a new direction, but I would question whether many scientists share the author's views. Some further comments:

- "Now I lay me down to sleep": The "gimme God" is not the God of well-formed adult Christian believers. To reject that concept of divinity doesn't require us to reject the Trinity and the personal God-become-man, Jesus; that would be the biggest "baby with the bath water" mistake in 2,000 years.
- The power of prayer: In the opinion of all the scientists I know, looking for statistically valid proof of answered prayers is the antithesis of

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both science and belief.

- Spiraling galaxies as a replacement for God: Improved scientific understanding—peeling another layer from the onion—teaches most scientists humility and awe in the face of the universe, but almost all would agree that this sort of approach may be a substitute for belief but should not be mistaken for belief.

I wish Raymo and his colleagues well. But theirs is very much a work in progress, and I believe they are off on the wrong track—one that could cause much confusion, loss of credibility in scientific and theological circles, and heartbreak if many are somehow led to believe that Jesus is a figment of mystic whatever. We will never scientifically demonstrate the existence of a personal God, or that Christ is our brother. We know that to sophisticates it may sound corny to say that God is love. But it is true.

ROBERT LAUDISE
Berkeley Heights, N.J.

Don't get sick in prison

Your cover story by an articulate prisoner [May 22] gives a too true picture of what passes for medical care inside the jailhouse. Although the dangerous flooding problem Raymond E. Williams describes may not be common, I am not surprised at the rest of his painful tale. In my experience as an attorney dealing with medical issues for only a handful of prisoners, I can attest to conditions that would amaze the average citizen. The prison system is given to delay, inefficiency, and, worst of all, an ingrained attitude of indifference toward the delivery of medical care—conditions that are exacerbated by overcrowding.

Readers may be surprised to know that once inside a local, state, or federal prison, access to a private physician, prescription medications, and special diet are left behind. Apart from physical medicine, the psychiatric side presents a professional anomaly that prisoners are often not aware of and that many lawyers fail to inform them of: In a court-ordered psychiatric examination, there is no patient confidentiality.

Unfortunately the federal constitutional standard for challenging the deprivation of a prisoner's right to medical care is extraordinarily high. Under the requirement of "deliberate indifference," negligence—or "mere" medical malpractice—does not make the grade. In state courts, I am told, common law medical malpractice has been used successfully to correct the kind of delays in the delivery of care that Williams describes.

Disenfranchised prisoners and their families without lobbying clout are not in a strong position to change the status quo. Regardless of the prisoner's crime, humane prison medicine is an area of need that cries out for our attention.

A. LAWRENCE WASHBURN, JR.
New York, N.Y.

Whose stereotype?

Why the editors of this publication are far more exercised about the Catholic League's protest of a blasphemous play than about the play itself is worthy of a symposium ["Shut Up, He Said," June 19]. Included in the symposium should be all those Jewish rabbis who have called the Catholic League commending us for our stand.

The mindset of the editors was also revealed when it was argued that the league's protest actually reinforces anti-Catholic stereotypes. I would contend that the real stereotype is the one the editors are advancing: Catholics ought to pare back and not engage the culture too much lest their provisional status be revoked.

By the way, it is not the Catholic League that is obsessed with "Nothing Sacred"; rather it is those disaffected Catholics who continue to live vicariously through this now defunct and discredited program. You made that point for me so nicely when you printed a letter that ran under the banner, "To Save 'Nothing Sacred.' Thank you for your support.

WILLLIAM A. DONOHUE
New York, N.Y.

The writer is president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights.

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Celebration

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Zen-Christian Retreat

A ZEN 'SESSHIN' (AN EXPERIENCE OF ZEN MEDITATION AND ITS INTEGRATION INTO CHRISTIAN LIFE) will be offered at Ignatius Retreat House, Manhasset, NY (August 2–8). The Director is Robert Kennedy, S.J., Professor of Theology (Saint Peter's College), Zen Master (Roshi), Psychologist, and Author (*Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit*, 1995). Retreat is initially open to fellow Jesuits, but after May 31, space permitting, open to others. All inquiries: 516/621-8300.

Correspondence

ELMER HEFFELMIRE, 92B1195, Mohawk Correctional Facility, Box 8451, Rome, NY 13442, Convert to Catholicism, 34 years old, wishes to correspond with a Catholic woman under 30. The number after the name is a necessary part of the address.

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VERNON ROBERTSON IS IN HEAVEN

Elizabeth Kirkland Cahill

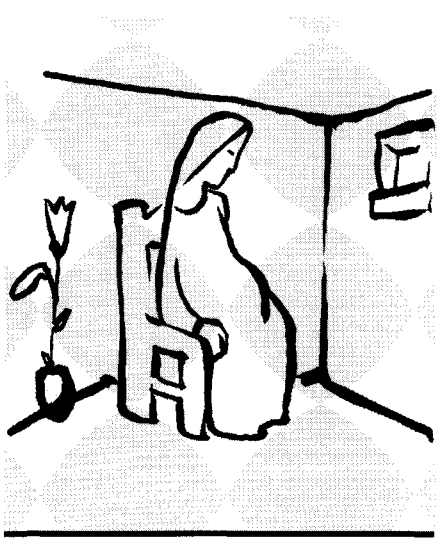
Although I no longer live there, the recent passing of my friend Vernon Robertson, for thirty-one years a Catholic priest in Louisville, Kentucky, has disoriented me. It was but three Easters ago that he, in the company of a Jesuit priest, a few relatives and friends, and the Carmelite nuns, welcomed me into the church. He was a fellow convert, funny, eloquent, and thoughtful, and he was a singular help as I took my last steps toward Catholicism. That he was seventy-five does not at all mitigate the disorientation. When is death ever timely?

A former Episcopal priest endowed with considerable family wealth and the jowly demeanor of an aging cherub, Vernon was ordained in Rome at the age of forty-four. In the three decades of his priesthood he helped found a network of inner-city Montessori schools, established Louisville's first residence for people with AIDS, and resurrected two dying parishes in parts of the city into which some of his well-heeled friends would never think of venturing. He knew everyone in town, and feared no one. He accomplished much and touched many, and the tributes since his unexpected death have been profuse.

To me and to the many others who loved him, the keenest loss is simply the loss of his presence. Vernon understood, with a Southerner's instinct for graciousness, that we manifest the divine spirit not through grandiose acts but through small gestures of generosity. He spent much of his time simply being with people—sharing a good meal, trading a joke, hatching yet another plan to bring about social justice, listening, always listening. So many of my own memories of him revolve around occasions of hospitality, from the spare breakfasts and rich conversations we used to share in an anteroom of the Carmelite monastery after he had said Saturday morning Mass, to the merry garden party he and his sister threw to celebrate his recovery from a nearly fatal illness.

He was, in his openness to people, the most Christlike person I have known. For how else did Christ spend much of his time, according to his disciples' accounts, but in simply being with people, listening, healing by his presence? And what better expression exists of the gospel of hospitality than the Mass, the sharing of the Body and the Blood?

Vernon loved the earthiness of his chosen faith. For all his refinement and good taste, he used to say with a chuckle that the vulgarity of Catholicism—the statues, the relics, the beads, the icons, the incense—was its chief attraction. Indeed, as he told it, his conversion was triggered by the sight of a statue of the pregnant Virgin on the grounds of the cathedral at Chartres (a mystery that grew with his later discovery that no such statue has ever stood there). His little house was so crammed with pious clutter that you couldn't move far at one of his lively, crowded parties without knocking over an icon or brushing up against one of the splendid banners, paintings, or photographs that hung upon the walls.



Saint Martin, Vernon's last parish, was aesthetically the perfect church for him, its interior animated by colorful life-sized statues, enormous stained glass panels, an ornately carved elevated pulpit, and, encased in glass, the relics of two third-century saints, Magnus and Bonosa. A funeral Mass in these surroundings, with choral polyphony echoing off the walls and incense floating through the air, was indeed a feast for the senses.

It was during his funeral that he made his final gift to me. As I sat in the packed church and listened to the triumphant reading from Isaiah ("On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines"), I suddenly understood, with the force of a revelation, that Vernon Robertson is in heaven.

My vision of heaven up until now has been vague. Unable to imagine its realms of glory, reluctant to reduce them to trite images of pearly gates and lute-toting angels, I have generally avoided the subject altogether. And yet in his death my friend has conferred upon me a new confidence: that although heaven is not a place as we understand place, it is the destination of joy for which God intends us, a place not defined by minutes or inches, but rendered gloriously infinite by a peace that passes understanding.

And I know one other thing about heaven. I know that Vernon Robertson is there, chuckling joyously as he shares with Christ a feast of rich food, of well-aged wines, beckoning us all toward communion with our Lord through the kind of generosity of life and heart that he embodied. □

Elizabeth Kirkland Cahill *is the co-author, with Joseph Papp, of* Shakespeare Alive! *(Bantam, 1988).*

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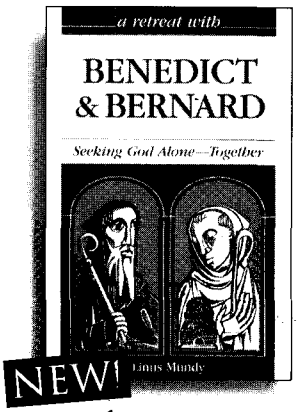

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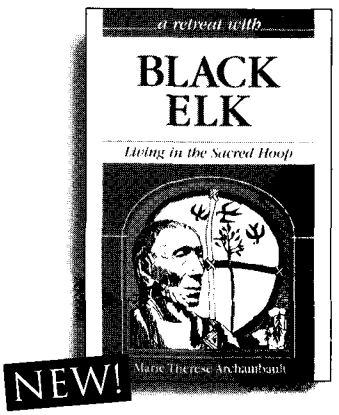

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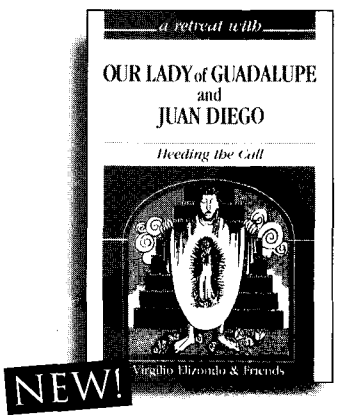

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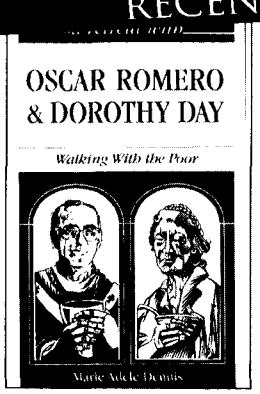

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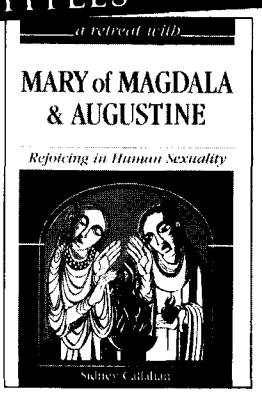

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